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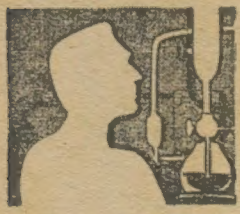

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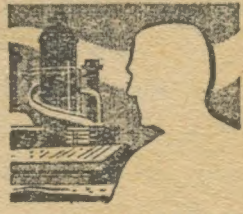

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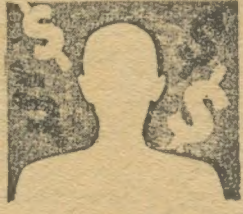

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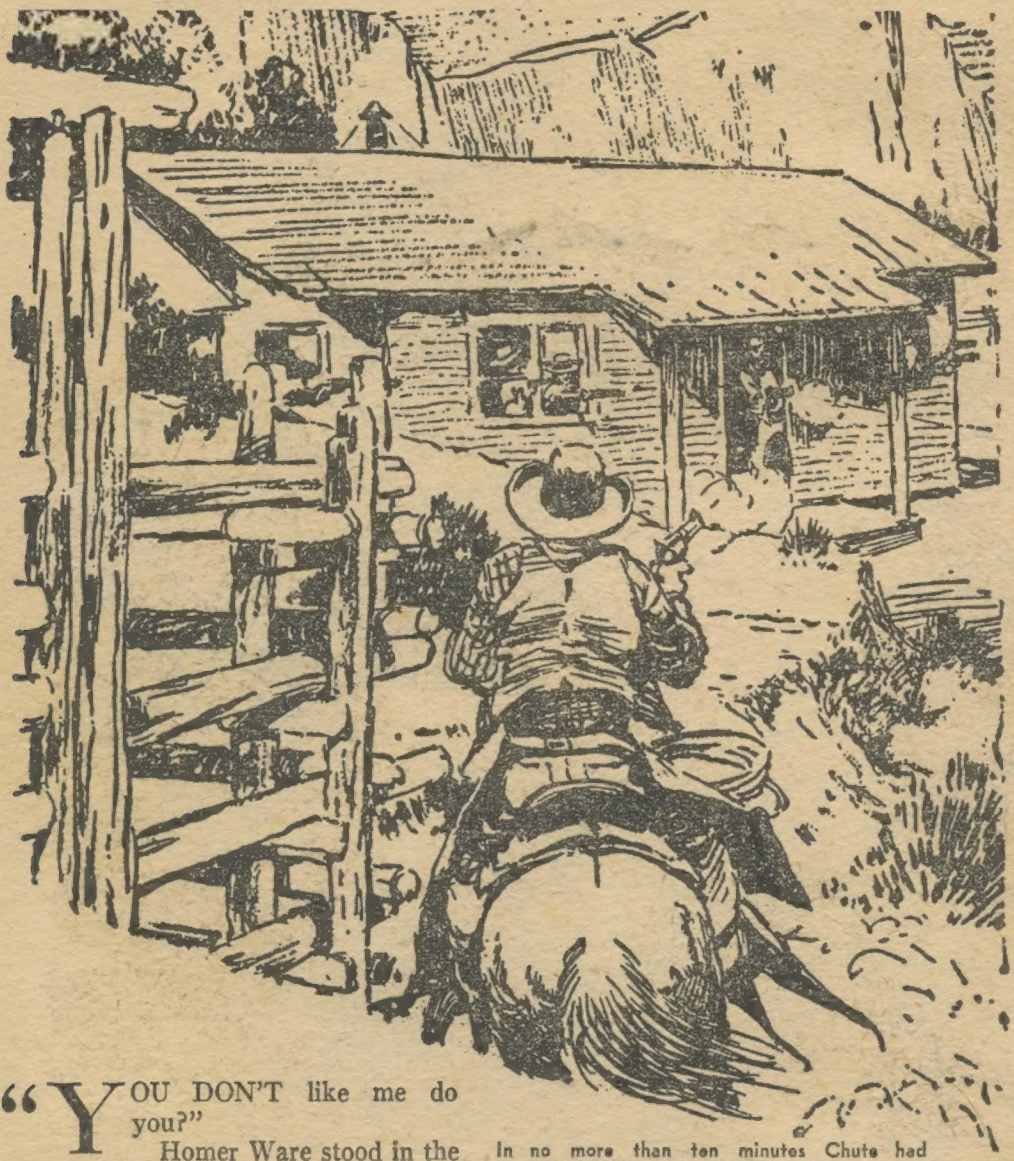

In no more than ten minutes Chute had single-handed wiped out Ballister's gun crew!

"YOU DON'T like me do you?"

Homer Ware stood in the middle of the big main room. One end of it was the kitchen, as denoted by the board-topped, combination cook- and heat-stove. The other end was the parlor, as set off by the patented rocker with its stabilizing springs, the trestle table with the gold-braid-trimmed runner on which sat a rococo lamp with a particolored opaque glass shade.

"Of course I like you."

Liz Ware had whirled from the stove. Flushed, she made a particular show of her raven-haired, red-mouthed beauty.

"'Like' is it," Homer Ware said.

Liz pinched in her lips and put her head on one side and her big dark-blue eyes flashed anger. She might

BLACKSTONE

by JOHN LUMSDEN

HIS GUNS WOULD BRING THE LAW TO THIS RAW FRONTIER!

★ ★ ★

It was his handiness with guns and fists that had always been Morley Chute's trouble . . .

have said many things again, but about to utter each of them, she must have remembered how futile they always were.

In the end, she whirled back to the stove, to the two pans of flapjacks and bacon.

Homer Ware's gaze lowered to the gay, flower-print apron she wore over her blue calico dress.

"That frilly thing ain't going to keep the fat from splashing on you."

Liz stared pinch-lipped at the wall in front of her, then down at her apron.

Homer Ware wore a twisted, empty little smile now. As if, perhaps, he'd felt the unpleasantness of his remark and hadn't exactly meant it to be nasty and was trying to smile to take the edge off it.

Liz turned and put her beautiful, wide eyes full on her husband and said gently,

"Is anything else wrong?"

Homer Ware had to lower his own eyes. No man would have found it easy to meet Liz Ware's gaze full on. This was particularly difficult for Ware. He was middle-aged, Liz was in her early twenties. And knowing so surely that she had never cared for him must have intensified his desire for her sometimes to a scarcely bearable degree.

"I didn't say anything was wrong."

"Yes you did. You said that my apron was no good."

"I didn't say it wasn't any good. I said it—"

"You'd like me to wear that—that *nightshirt*, that *cover-all*, you brought me."

"I didn't mean that."

"Yes you did."

She abruptly was scooping flapjacks and bacon onto a plate. She put the plate on the table. She poured scalding coffee into the big white ironstone cup beside the plate.

"There's your breakfast. If there's anything wrong with it, be sure to tell me about it."

Homer Ware took off his stetson uncomfortably, running fingers back through his thick tangled hair in the same gesture. He sat down at the table.

Once he looked up, halfway through the food.

"Ain't you going to eat nothing?"

"I ate while you were out on the range."

SHE TOOK a strip of rawhide and pliers from the shed off the kitchen and went out to the barn. She worked capably on the rig of her roan mare. Her fingers were strong, though the skin had a satiny, tan sheen, and the bones of her wrists delicate. And in the contrast of delicacy and strength that showed in her hands and bare arms, was her story. There you saw the careful upbringing that her parents had given her back East before her father had decided to take his little family and try his luck in the New West. And there too you saw her maturing, since that fateful day seven years before when Homer Ware had rescued her, a child then of fourteen, from the band of Comanches who'd already killed her parents and put the torch to their Conestoga.

And crouched at her task, remembering all this again, Liz softened again. More and more often she had been sharp with Homer in recent months, and she deplored now once again that she was feeling less and less the gratitude she knew she owed him.

Gratitude? Her very life. He had taken her to his home and cared for her. And after something less than two years, he had married her, with no thought of questioning this action occurring to her at the time.

"So folks won't talk," he'd explained at the time, with his twisted little smile, and that had been quite all right with her. She pictured Homer as her only relative, as a sort of father-uncle-guardian, and whatever he decided, she was prepared to abide by implicity. And Homer had never overstepped his guardian role.

Not, at least, until recently. Two things had begun, clearly, to happen lately: Homer was becoming interested in Liz as a woman; and Liz was becoming aware that she *was* now a woman, and, as such, entitled to some sovereignty over her own life.

One night, recently, Homer had come to the open door of Liz's room, when she was sitting up in bed reading, and he had said "Hello", with his twisted, humorless grin, and this had disturbed Liz considerably.

She had replied "Hello" in an arch, joking way, and he had gone to his room, which was side by side with hers, and that was all there'd been to it. But there was a new thing here; this wasn't the manner and tone of an uncle with a niece, a guardian with his young ward.

And there was always the fact that she *was* Homer's legal wife—

"Hello."

That word, coming at that moment, sufficiently startled Liz to upset her onto her back in the pile of hay heaped at one side of the barn.

"Oh," she gasped.

Because the man standing silhouetted against the dazzle of morning sun was not Homer Ware.

Liz had actually not met many men. That had been another disturbing recent realization: Liz was pretty sure that Homer made a point of not letting her have much contact with other men; that he carefully prevented other men from visiting his place. She knew, for example, that he'd been having some trouble with a new neighbor—an ambitious man who, from what she'd gathered in town, was shoving out in all directions—but Homer wouldn't talk to her about this, as though he didn't want her to think about the outside world. Which gave additional edge to Liz's already unreasonably flustered reaction to the appearance now of a stranger.

Furthermore, the stranger had an attitude with her quite unlike any other man she'd ever seen. Men, she had noticed without yet giving much thought to the reason, usually acted rather awkward around her, embarrassed, hesitant. But already, before in the bright light she could even make out his features, Liz could sense the difference in this man.

In the very quiet way he stood, mostly.

In the matter-of-fact way he said, "I'm looking for a job."

"A job?" she stammered.

He laughed and suddenly took her arm in fingers of steel and literally lifted her to her feet.

"I know what you need," he said. "You need me to help you up so we can start this conversation all over again on an equal footing."

Which, however, completely blasted all ability at conversation out of Liz. Blasted, in fact, her very breath out of her. So that she simply stood there staring wide-eyed at the stranger—

"Hey," he said. "I'm not *that* frightening."

And then—she saw that he was young—perhaps only a few years older than she—and she saw his wide, flat mouth, with the easy hitch in one corner of it—and his sun-weathered skin tight over high cheekbones—and his quiet, his so very quiet, grey eyes—and the easy way his battered but spotless pearl-gray stetson sat atop his tight, sandy hair—

He had taken the makings out of a breast pocket of his weather-bleached tan shirt and built a cigarette with one hand.

As he licked it into final shape, looking with calm amusement over it into her wider-than-ever eyes, he said,

"I see now what your trouble is. You haven't been able to identify me. I'll help you again—I'm a man. Homo sapiens."

"Oh I know that," she managed to whisper.

"Oh you did know that." He put a match to his cigarette, taking his eyes off her for the first time to focus them on the pale splash of flame.

"Oh yes."

Then, suddenly, she smiled at him. A very wide, open smile. And shifted her eyes off him, before, though, having decided exactly what else to do with them.

HOMER WARE of course told the stranger that he wasn't hiring at this time. His Circle HW was a fair-sized spread, on which he employed three whangleather oldsters year round, taking on additional hands only for branding and shipping.

At the window of her room, Liz watched the stranger ease his sorrel down off the ledge that rimmed the yard on the trail side, disappear from view. The sorrel somehow had for her the same quality as its rider: the same lean, hard trimness that the man's figure did; the same soft, pearly look as his stetson. Together, they took on a sort of magic Knight-In-Shining-Armor aura, and Liz felt almost a pain of sadness at sight of the stranger riding away.

Then, though, it was funny but true, she saw the man make a gesture, just before he slipped from sight, that caused her heart to pound with mysterious happiness.

The gesture was actually nothing—but to Liz it somehow carried a strange message of happiness and hope. The man simply squinted up at the sky. It was a hot, bright, cloudless morning sky—and the stranger simply squinted up at it.

But in the way he did it there was a defiance, an easy insolence that told Liz that nothing in the world would stop this man if he didn't want it to....

So her heart really pounded when she saw, shortly before noon the next day, the stranger ride back into the Circle HW ranchyard. And step down. And build and put flame to a cigarette.

Homer Ware, who'd been enlarging the corral, dropped the rail he was ax-whittling, came around the house.

"Howdy," the stranger said.

"I told you I wasn't hiring, mister."

"That was what you told me, I know."

The stranger hit Homer Ware then. His right fist licked out and crossed Homer's jaw and then the same long fingers took firm hold of Homer's shirtfront in order to ease his limp body to the ground.

The stranger took the riata from his saddle and rolled Homer over on his stomach and had Homer's wrists looped behind him before Homer could regain his senses.

Liz, watching dumbfounded from the doorway, ran toward the stranger now.

"You can't do that! Oh, you mustn't do that!" she cried.

"I know what," he said to Liz. "You show me where his bed is."

"Oh what are you doing!" Liz swung her hands in despair.

He had Homer Ware's ankles bound now too, and as easily as if he were lifting a child, he hefted the chunky man onto one shoulder and started for the house with him.

"It looks like I'll have to discover his room myself."

Homer Ware came to right after the stranger dumped him into the big four-poster.

"Listen, mister, I'm telling you you're going to be sorry for this—" Homer Ware began, virtually apoplectic with rage.

Began, because the stranger jabbed a gag in his mouth.

"Oh what are you doing," Liz said in a new but feebler despair.

"You did ask that," the stranger smiled at Liz.

SHE ABRUPTLY went and got a gun. She came to the door of Homer's room and aimed it at the stranger. The stranger stopped in the midst of swathing most of Homer's head in bandages made from a sheet he tore up, and took the gun away

from Liz and laid it on the chest of drawers beside the bed.

"None of that," he said.

The stranger arranged the bandages carefully, so that Homer's nose and chin and forehead and ears and tangled mop of hair showed. Once while he worked at this, Liz came with a length of corral rail and raised it as though to bring it down on the back of the stranger's head, and he had to leave his handiwork again long enough to take this from her too.

"Now come on now," he said to her.

"You will be sorry for this," she gritted, her face all screwed up with the effort of trying to keep him from taking the club from her. Her pulling away carried them into the main room. The stranger had to put his arm around her finally to control her. And holding this beautiful, struggling girl close against him proved too much for the stranger. The big, wide, dark-blue eyes and the strands of raven-black hair across the soft red lips were, for a moment too near to resist. So the stranger kissed her....

He had Homer arranged in bed expertly when the dozen-odd riders appeared; Homer did indeed look convincingly like a man who'd been kicked half to death by a killer bronc.

That was what the stranger told the hard-eyed riders had happened.

"Look," he said. "The man was just kicked half to death by a killer bronc. You expect him to talk to you in that shape?"

Told it to them right in the face of their levelled guns. They filled the house. Three of them went into Homer's room and looked at him warily as a poisonous snake. The others kept their guns on the stranger. One of them kept his bloodshot eyes on Liz, who was backed flat against the wall beside the stove dumb with terror.

One of the gunmen slapped the back of his hand across the stranger's mouth The stranger licked his lips slowly.

"Who are you, fella?" this one asked the stranger.

The latter said, "I was taken on for round-up."

"The hell you were. Round-up ain't for a couple months yet." He reached out and lifted the stranger's .45. He broke it and took out the five cartridges and tossed the gun on the floor.

"For spring round-up," the stranger said softly.

"So what are you still hanging around for. You look like a hired gun to me—"

"Okay, let's go," one of the men who'd been in Homer Ware's room said.

"Look, fella, you tell your boss we'll be back. And if he's still in bed the next time we come, he better have some hardware under his pillow."

"Who shall I say called?" the stranger said.

The other, about to leave with his companions, turned back slowly at this.

"You're a pretty funny talker, ain't you, fella."

"Okay, let's go, let's go," one of the gunmen said.

"What about the filly," the one who'd never taken his eyes off Liz said.

"The hell with that," another one said. "Let's get out of here."

Instead of knuckles, a gun muzzle was slapped across the stranger's face this time.

"You're a pretty funny talker, ain't you, fella."

"AT THE saloon, huh," Homer said again.

After the stranger, who introduced himself as Morley Chute, unswathed Homer, he told him about overhearing the talk of the gunsters. And though Homer Ware listened peacefully enough, because he could not avoid the fact that this Chute had saved his life, he listened with a wariness, as though searching for a flaw in the fellow's story that would allow

him to tell him to get the hell on down the trail.

And just when, squirming uncomfortably, it looked as though Homer was cornered into gratitude by Morley Chute's act, Homer's brain wandered onto that possible flaw.

"So why did you care what happened to me?" Homer stabbed. His look became shrewd, askance. "What was I to you?"

If Morley Chute wasn't on the level in this, nobody could have denied that his act was impenetrable. He grinned cagily at Homer, lighting a limp quirley.

"I needed a riding job. I figured if a man owed you his life, maybe he'd kind of feel obligated to give you such a job."

Which of course put Homer back on his heels again. Way back, because now what he knew but was trying to hide from, was out in the open: the stranger had not only saved Homer's life, he was quite conscious of it.

Homer rubbed his face, hard. He wrestled with himself. And grunted. All that was writhing in him was in that grunt. Homer's eyes, avoiding Chute's, went out of his room to Liz, at the stove, her back eloquently still in what could have been taken to be a listening pose. And at sight of her, apparently, Homer screwed his face into a very weird mask.

"Okay, mister," Homer ground out, "you're hired."

Homer set Chute to riding line. Without particular instructions.

Once, when Chute had come in for midday chow, he said to Homer, "How ready do you want me to keep my gun out there? You want me to throw down on any son I see not straddling a Circle HW animal? Or are slow-elkers in the act all I'm watching for?"

Because Homer Ware had shown no sign of being concerned about the obviously very dangerous threat to him that the gunmen represented. They'd be back, they had said, yet Homer made no apparent preparations to repel them. The only hands, and they were certainly not hired guns, that Chute had seen around the place were two or three grizzled graybeards.

Homer screwed up his face again that way, sweat running down his leathery cheek under the bright, hot sun. The man seemed distracted, Chute thought. So that he didn't seem to be able to think about saving himself.

The girl came out of the house, in white blouse and blue jeans now. And seeing her, Ware dropped the harried cast of his face into long, dead grooves. *The girl,* Chute thought suddenly. *She is the trouble.*

What the devil, Chute thought then. *Could she actually be his wife?*

She went to the barn, where Chute had first seen her three days before. She got a saddle and headed with it toward the corral.

"Hey," Homer called to her, and Chute noted the huskiness in the man's voice.

"I'm going into town for supplies," Liz said.

And Chute noted the quality of her speech too. This was the too-ready, the too-complete explanation, Chute thought, and he reached for the makings, a queer look coming into his eyes. And about to suggest to Ware, was it safe for the lady to ride unescorted, he didn't say anything.

Homer pulled his attention back to Chute, focussed it as though with difficulty, as though peering at him through a narrow channel.

"Slow-elkers?" he said distantly. "That's it, throw down on any slow-elkers."

"Sure," Morley Chute drawled, and got his horse....

IT WAS something over two miles to town. Bendton was a scatteration of frame shells that had been thrown up when, a few years back, this section promised to boom, but the first gold panned failed to keep coming. An emporium had survived and a saloon and a law office of sorts. The town sat in a hollow, half-circled by a low

run of pine-covered hills. It was beyond these that the Circle HW stretched, and it was within these that Morley Chute caught up with Liz Ware.

She had been moving her animal at a steady canter. She pulled it in and turned it, at sound of hoofbeats coming behind her, without alarm.

She put her eyes on Morley Chute's.

He said, "Hello." She replied, "Hello," hesitant, very soft.

He said, "You shouldn't ride alone after what happened."

She said, "What does 'homo sapiens' mean?"

"Man."

"Man?"

"U'm. It's one of those words that when you're a lawyer you learn a whole lot of so people won't know what you're talking about."

"Are you a lawyer?"

After a moment he said, "Let's say that I should be a lawyer."

She put her head on one side studying him with amiable puzzlement. This evidently caused her to think about the patches of bandage that crisscrossed his face, and her voice became very gentle:

"Your face was hurt terribly, wasn't it."

"Not bad."

And then, their eyes holding locked, he swung his horse in beside hers, and she waited for him to kiss her and closed her eyes only when he did, taking her one shoulder in his hand.

Then to hold her better and to kiss her better, he gripped both her shoulders.

"Is he your husband?"

She started to nod, shook her head instead. Emphatically.

"No... No."

He took the leather of her horse and got them off the road into the pines. He stepped down and lifted her down. With her, thus, in his arms again, he kissed her again. Her fingernails dug into his back, then her palms were flat against the slabs of his shoulder muscles.

Liz told Morley Chute everything then. That Ware had actually always been her guardian, not her husband. That the marriage existed on legal paper only.

That Homer Ware, though, was plainly wanting it to be a real marriage now. That she owed Homer Ware everything—her very life, this very moment, for if it had not been for Homer, she would not have been here now.

"So you see," she murmured, searching his eyes.

She had poured out the story as they'd stood there in each other's arms, her palms sliding nervously over his back as she talked, his mouth in her hair as he gazed narrow-eyed seeing nothing, seeing only in his brain the pictures she was conjuring.

"So I see," he said.

AND SO it stood that night, when the gunmen came back. With their boss this time, Ware's new neighbor. Ballister, the fellow's name was. Len Ballister. He was on the young side, with a kind of bright face that betrayed decent blood somewhere in his make-up; with a barren, twisted, too-wide mouth that told of a hellish childhood probably, where the only truth to be learned was that he only survived who stepped on others, where whatever soul originally inhabited him was quickly squeezed out of him.

"Where are you, Ware? Come out of your bed or I'll pull you out of it."

Len Ballister shouted it as he strode casually toward the house from where, at the lower edge of the yard, he and his hardbitten crew had dismounted.

Ballister looked around amiably, seeing no one. Finally one of the oldsters appeared in the doorway of the bunkshack, his hairy lower lip protruding in weakness and stubborn defiance.

Ballister palmed his gun almost too swiftly and lightly, so that it almost got out of his hand. He triggered it once, though, at the proper point—

before it had gone to inaccuracy too far out on his fingertips. The bullet smashed the old cowhand in the chest, set him back out of view in the bunkhouse, his loose lower lip trembling as though he were trying to hold it stiff against a welling of blood in his throat.

"Stay out of this, old man," Ballister called pointlessly to the graybeard.

Another of the three oldsters that were Ware's cow crew showed his face for a moment at a window of the same building, and Ballister delivered sufficient lead through it to cut it out cleanly, jagged shards—that first appeared—and all.

Ballister extended, by its muzzle, his empty gun to one of his men.

"I need a full gun," he said, and the fellow quickly tendered the weapon from his left holster.

"Come out, Ware," Ballister intoned again. "I don't like you for a neighbor, and when I don't like a man, I remove him." He half turned to one of his gunsters and said in an aside, "Is his horse in the corral?"

"There's a roan and a sorrel and a big palomino. He rides a palomino, don't he?"

"I know you're in there!" Ballister shouted at the house again. He had stopped a hundred feet from the veranda and he stood facing it square-on, his two fancy boots set apart, his men deployed, twenty strong and all two-gun-hung, on each side of him. "Show, Ware! Come out shooting! Forget the sheriff, Ware, I paid him off, he wouldn't come to your assistance even if you sent somebody for him and tried to hold out till he got here with a posse.

"You're a dead duck, Ware, whether you crawfish or fight, so you might as well come out triggering! I want your spread, Ware, I'm taking it, it's like that!"

The same dead silence followed Len Ballister's oratory. He stood there spread-legged and his eyes, wide open in his unmoving head, roved about devilishly...

INSIDE the house, Homer Ware and Morley Chute and Liz Ware were each near enough to a window to see and hear what was happening but back out of reach of thrown lead. When, after this last speech of Len Ballister's, they exchanged looks, the fading light of day caught the whites of their eyes ominously.

Homer Ware hitched up his trousers, pulled his lower lip hard back against his teeth. He said, "You got to get the girl out of here." —To Chute.

Ballister's "even if you sent somebody" had stuck in Chute's brain, for it endorsed his own idea. The pines came in close enough behind the house that a man could make a break through them on foot for town, with a good chance of success. Practically since Ballister in his complete self-confidence had not, as far as could be seen, bothered to surround the house.

Chute still had the volume of Blackstone in his hand, the borrowing of which had been his pretense for being near Liz, and he placed it carefully on the trestle table.

And in that moment his and Liz's eyes met with eloquent meaning. They both knew what was here: they could go away from here together and leave Homer to be neatly eliminated by Len Ballister's killers; they could go away free and clear to have each other forever—

"Out the back," Homer Ware was saying in a tense, husky voice. "They'll watch the horses, they won't look for you on foot. And I'll keep them busy meantime."

He was taking the two .30-30's off the wall. He got cartridges out of the sideboard drawer and tossed the cartons of them on the table.

"I'm telling you, Chute, get going."

Liz found her voice first.

"No. No, I won't go."

Morley Chute said, "You wouldn't have a chance trying to stand them off

murdering gunslingers alone."

Homer Ware's emotions were plainly torn at by Liz's words. The look he put on her carried all the deep longing he felt for her. But he as quickly cut this off and turned his gaze on Chute.

"I'm telling you, Chute, get her out of here!"

Homer's look had not been so brief, though, that Liz wasn't able to read it, and she said in a strange tone, with a sort of choking sob in her voice,

"No, Homer, I won't go. We're—I'm staying to help you."

And if Chute was still wavering in his mind, Liz's "we're" slip straightened him out. He saw that the conflict was as sharp in her mind as in his own, and he saw clearly now how she was deciding it.

—And how any human being who wanted to be able to sleep nights would have to decide it—

"Your wife wants to stick, Ware, and so do I," Chute said softly. "There's nothing you can do about that."

"All right you damned ninny," Len Ballister's voice, closer now, suddenly cut across their consciousness. *"I'll come in and get you then!"*

Chute took one of the two rifles. He handled it a moment and then he put it to work. One thing that Morley Chute was in particular was a crack shot, and he brought that skill stunningly into play now. *A devil of a lot better gunster than lawyer,* Chute thought with bitter irrelevance. It was his handiness with guns, Chute guessed, that had always been his trouble: a kid liked to practice what he was good at easily. Becoming a lawyer was tough, it took a man—

Chute had this habit of thinking impertinently when he was shooting. He'd found as with a sure instinct that it made him shoot better. His thoughts, thus distracted, didn't clutter up the pure line of sharply accurate bead-drawing.

So that when Chute brought his mind back to it, he was looking out on the flat in front of the house and already counting five Ballister-men crawling blood-dripping onto their faces in the dirt.

Homer Ware had scarcely yet taken a place at another window. The room literally trembled, somewhat of course from the Ballister barrage chewing at it, but more, it seemed, with the violence of Morley Chute's levering and triggering and slamming new cartridges into place and blasting away again.

Liz, in fact, stood as though fascinated at the parlor-end table, the box of cartridges she'd taken to ready for quick reloading, still unopened in one hand—wide-eyed with wonder at the spectacle of this man in whom she had immediately felt almost terrible force, but without suspecting the extent of it demonstrated here.

So that it was indeed as though Fate took a hand, because there was scarcely necessity or point in Homer Ware's being killed by one of Ballister's wildly delivered bullets. Homer Ware might have stayed back out of danger with Liz, for all the use he was in the fight. For Morley Chute needed no help. In no more than ten minutes he had devastated, single-handed, Len Ballister and his twenty-man crew. At the end they were just standing out in that front yard—those that weren't dead—stunned, dazed, guns hanging useless, making no attempt to refill them, still less possessing any longer even the impulse to hightail and save their hides.

They were simply there, at the end, like tincans on a corral fence, to be knocked over by Morley Chute's thundering, flaming weapon...

LIZ WEPT unashamedly at Homer Ware's grave. Morley Chute had dug it himself, that morning behind the house. The two old cowhands had dug their partner's grave, right beside their boss', and they, besides Liz, were the only listeners as Chute read a short

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EL COMANCHE

by PHILIP KETCHUM

Around Camarillo, a man's horse was more important than his wife, or his gun, or the land he owned.....

THIS IS one of the Camarillo stories, a legend of the old Southwest. I heard it first, many years ago, from a man who had known almost a hundred summers in Camarillo country, having first come there when just a boy, and who insisted he had seen El Comanche with his own eyes. His shaky voice took on a new tone while describing the big, red stallion, and his stooped shoulders seemed to straighten.

El Comanche, he insisted, was like no other horse who had ever lived. Greater than any of the others the oldtimers could recall. Faster, and smarter, and with more courage. And this was quite a statement, for those oldtimers who still gather in Camarillo's public square on the warm summer days, have a fund of horse stories, almost endless.

How true are their stories? I don't know. Some, perhaps, are complete fiction. And some are pure fact. And some are a mixture of both. I have spent months trying to check them, plowing through musty old records. And often, as in the case of El Comanche, I can find supporting evidence for the tale I have heard.

But records make dry reading. In

a legend, there is life. So here is the story of El Comanche, as the oldtimers tell it. And they swear it is true....

ONE DAY, late in the spring, Bill Holbrook rode into Camarillo mounted on a huge red stallion no townsman had ever seen before. He reined up in front of the sheriff's office, dismounted, and went inside, and the dozen or more men who were watching noticed that he didn't tie the stallion, or even ground the reins.

A crowd gathered around the big red horse immediately. For this was a country where a man's horse was often more important that his gun, or his wife, or the land he owned. And a horse such as this one, was especially worthy of notice. A big horse, and heavy, but still with the lines of a runner. The tight muscled flanks and tapering legs. The lean, firm belly. A horse with a high arched neck and flowing mane, and showing some of the characteristics of the Morgan, yet larger than any Morgan has ever grown.

"Hey, you didn't tie your nag," shouted someone as Holbrook left the sheriff's office.

"You don't have to tie El Comanche," Holbrook answered. "He stands where you tell him. And watch this."

Holbrook stepped to the street, grinning, and enjoying every minute of this. For Holbrook was a man who loved horses and in El Comanche he had a horse to be proud of. Standing close to the stallion, he drew and fired his gun. At the nearby tie-rail, several horses reared, and one pulled away. But El Comanche hardly twitched an ear.

"So he's deaf, huh?" said Ed Logan.

"Deaf?" said Holbrook. "Watch this."

He walked away from the stallion, and from across the street, called, "Hey, El Comanche! Here!"

At the sound of the name the big red horse wheeled around and trotted to where Holbrook was waiting.

The story of how Holbrook had acquired El Comanche came out a few minutes later in the Adobe Saloon, and it was a weird story. Two nights before, a stranger had ridden El Comanche up to Holbrook's ranch. The stranger had been shot through the chest. He was unconscious from loss of blood. It was Holbrook's guess he had ridden a long ways after being wounded. This morning, the man had died, but before his death he had awakened long enough to ask that Holbrook notify certain people of what had happened to him. In return for this small favor, he had given Holbrook the big red horse. Who had shot him, or why, the man didn't reveal. Nor did the sheriff's investigation, conducted later, ever disclose that angle of the story.

On that first afternoon, a dozen men, or perhaps more, tried to talk Holbrook into selling El Comanche. Ed Logan, another rancher, was perhaps the most insistant of these men, pointing out that Holbrook already owned one of the finest horses in the valley. A black named Sultan.

Holbrook, however, would listen to no offers. "Not yet," he insisted. "Not yet. But maybe, one of these days, I'll have to sell either Sultan or El Comanche. They hated each other on sight, those two. If my corral hadn't been strong and high, one would have killed the other."

"Then let me have El Comanche," said Logan.

But Holbrook shook his head.

ED LOGAN was short, and stocky. About forty years old. He was a widower. He had a ranch north of Camarillo, which he ran with the help of two men. And in addition to his cattle, constantly cross breeding different strains, trying to develop some new type of horse. He had been at this for a dozen years, but with only indifferent success.

The minute he had seen El Comanche, he had wanted him. Here was a stallion he had to have, a stallion he wanted for his brood mares. What

blood lines were in El Comanche, he didn't know, but he would take a chance.

In the two weeks which followed he made several trips to the Holbrook ranch to talk to Bill Holbrook. But though Holbrook agreed to put him on top the list should he decide to sell El Comanche, Holbrook would go no farther.

Ed Logan was in pretty deep, financially. He had used up what cash he had. He was in debt to the bank. And it came to him suddenly that even if Holbrook should agree to sell him El Comanche, he probably couldn't raise the purchase price.

He had never particularly liked Holbrook, and what followed was perhaps inevitable. He had once received a note from Holbrook, and from this note, he laboriously traced out a bill of sale for El Comanche, imitating Holbrook's handwriting. Then late one afternoon, from a screen of shrubbery along the road, he shot Holbrook in the head. And later, hid his body. The story he told in town was that Holbrook had delivered El Comanche to him, and then ridden back toward home on a borrowed horse.

IT WAS three weeks before the people in Camarillo knew the truth, and it came to them in a startling fashion. Jim Cassidy, riding out to his place from town, came across the body of Ed Logan, just beyond the Four Mile creek bridge. Logan had been shot twice through the stomach. He was still alive when Cassidy found him, and still alive when the doctor and the sheriff got out to Cassidy's place. Alive, but not much more.

Logan's first words to the sheriff told of how he had been stopped by a man he recognized as Sam Otway, and of his gun duel with Otway, who had wanted the horse he was riding. El Comanche. Then later, and aware of the fact that he was dying, Logan told the story of the murder of Bill Holbrook, and of the forged bill of sale.

Sam Otway had been on the dodge for a number of years. He was thin, stooped, bitter. A man in the late forties. He had once owned a ranch near Camarillo, had lost it through his own ill-management, but had blamed the bank which had held the mortgage. He was a lazy man. A man of little imagination. His career as an outlaw, had he worked on his own, wouldn't have lasted very long, but he tied in with Buller Grant, and as one of Grant's men, did very well.

Like some little men, however, he thought himself entitled to better things. And it was Otway's notion that mounted on a horse like El Comanche, he could command the attention he deserved. With El Comanche, he wouldn't be just one of the crowd. He would be important.

It didn't work out that way, however. Buller Grant was watching when he rode El Comanche into the outlaws' hideout, high in the Quemado mountains. And Buller Grant, a big, square shouldered man, had all his life taken the best things for himself. The Buller knew horses. He didn't have to see the big red stallion put through his paces. He could tell from a look that El Comanche could run. And that was important to him.

"Where did you get the horse?" he asked Otway.

"Took him," Otway answered. "I've been needing a horse like El Comanche."

"I'll buy him from you," said Buller Grant.

Otway had tested El Comanche on his ride up into the hills. He knew how the horse could run. And the mere fact of being mounted on the big red had given him a sense of power. He was beginning to think of striking out on his own.

"He's not for sale," he said bluntly.

"Then I'll take him," said Buller Grant.

A sudden fear struck across Otway's mind, a realization that he had gone

too far. He shook his head, forcing a laugh. "We'll talk about it later," he managed to say. "Later." And with that, he brushed past Buller Grant in the direction of the cabins. Sometime tonight, he told himself, he would slip away. He didn't have to work for another man any longer. With El Comanche, he could run away from any posse in the land.

Otway had taken scarcely a dozen steps, however, before he heard Buller Grant calling his name. Calling, "Otway! Otway! Turn around."

He turned. He turned and saw the gun in the Buller's hand, and too late, he clawed at his holster. A bullet through the chest sent him reeling backwards. Another drove him to the ground. And as his senses faded he heard the Buller saying, "Otway wasn't much account, anyhow. We'll never miss him."

ONE OF the outlaws who witnessed this was Jose Alvarado. He was a young man. Thin. Tall. Darkly handsome. He came of one of the Mexican families in Camarillo, and why he was here with Buller Grant, he really didn't know. He had been driven into hiding as the result of a hot-headed killing. He was not an outlaw in the sence that most of these men were outlaws, but potentially, he was more dangerous. Potentially, he was another Billy-the-Kid. Since the killing which had driven him from Camarillo, he had killed four other men. Not in hold-ups or robberies. Not for any understandable reason. But Lou Hofstetter, who was then sheriff in Camarillo, had an explanation. "He kills for the love of it," said Hofstetter. "He's gone gun-crazy."

Five days later, Buller Grant returned to the outlaw camp from a trip outside. He reined up near the cabin, swung to the ground, and stood for a moment at the side of El Comanche, nodding at some decision he had made. After this, he hurried to the cabin and pushed open the door.

Jose Alvarado, sitting in the cabin's shade, finished polishing one of his guns, holstered it, and then stared reflectively at the big red horse. A wonderful horse. He could picture himself riding up to see Donna Elena on a horse like El Comanche. He could imagine her delighted cries when she saw the stallion. After a time he got to his feet and walked to where El Comanche was standing. He rubbed his hands over the horse's neck. He murmured to the horse in his own tongue and El Comanche pricked up his ears as though familiar with the language.

"What you doing with my horse?" shouted a voice from the cabin's door. "Get away from him."

Alvarado turned. He saw Buller Grant coming forward. There was an ugly scowl on the Buller's face. He seemed in evil spirits.

"Get away," he shouted again. "Keep your dirty hands to yourself."

Buller Grant was used to roaring at his men in this fashion. He probably expected Alvarado to slink away. He certainly had no warning of anything else until he saw Alvarado's gun whip up at him. There was a single shot. No more. And no more was needed.

Before the other outlaws in the cabin could reach the door, Jose Alvarado was in the saddle of El Comanche, and was tearing away. He wouldn't return. He had never really liked it here. From now on, he would be his own master.

SHERIFF LOU HOFSTETTER was somewhat surprised at the summons to the home of Dona Elena Remirez. He asked the Mexican who brought him the message, what Dona Elena wanted, but received no answer. Then later that day he rode to the Ramirez hacienda.

Dona Elena, a widow for the past three years, was still a young and very beautiful woman. She received the sheriff with a warm and friendly smile and ordered that drinks be

served in the patio. Then, after the usual formalities, came suddenly to the point of the visit.

"You are anxious, I believe, to apprehend a certain outlaw," said Dona Elena. "One known as Jose Alvarado."

"That I am," said the sheriff.

Dona Elena smiled. "It could be arranged."

"Could it," growled Lou Hofstetter. And he was suddenly sorry he had come here. He didn't think he would like what he was going to hear.

"Yes," said Dona Elena, "it could. But for a price."

"And the price?"

"The horse he will be riding," said Dona Elena. "I must have his horse."

"I am not interested in horses," muttered the sheriff.

"Then it is agreed?"

Lou Hofstetter stood up. "I suppose it is."

"I will notify you when to come," said Dona Elena. "And I will expect you to speak of this to no one, and to come alone."

Three days later, Lou Hofstetter received another message from Dona Elena. He was to be at her place at midnight, in the patio. And at the appointed time he attempted to arrest Jose Alvarado, as the outlaw was leaving. There was a quick exchange of shots, and Jose Alvarado was killed. Then, before riding back to town, the sheriff took a look at the outlaw's horse, and recognized El Comanche. And Lou Hofstetter was quite puzzled as he returned to Camarillo. Some things, he could understand definitely. It was clear to him, for instance, that Dona Elena had led Jose Alvarado to his death. And the price for this was clear. El Comanche. But why should Dona Elena want a horse like El Comanche? A horse which no one could ride, and live. What use could the beautiful Dona Elena have for a horse like that?

He had his answer in about a week. Cutting across the country on an important errand, he stopped for his noon meal at Jim Cassidy's ranch, far up on Four Mile creek.

"Let me show you something," said Cassidy, after they had eaten. "Something that's got me worried."

They walked out to the barn, and there in one of the stalls was the big, red stallion. El Comanche. His skin seemed to glow, even in the shadows, and he tossed his head and whistled at the sight of the two men.

"Where did you get him?" asked the sheriff.

"In a poker game, in the Adobe Saloon, three nights ago," said Jim Cassidy. "I won him from Esteban Rojas. And you know it was funny, the way it happened. Rojas was down to his last chips. He had never had many. And he had no cards showing to buck me, but he insisted on it. He put up his horse against the size of my pile. Like a fool, I called him. I didn't know until later that his horse was El Comanche. And I'm not sure, right now, that I own El Comanche. How come Rojas had him? I haven't been able to find Rojas to get the story?"

"Most men wouldn't worry too much about the title to a horse, if the title wasn't questioned," said the sheriff.

"Wouldn't they?" said Cassidy. "What happened to Jose Alvarado, to Buller Grant, to Sam Otway, to Ed Logan, to Bill Holbrook, and to the man who rode El Comanche here. All are dead. Every man who has owned El Comanche, has died. I don't want to die, sheriff. I want to live."

"Can I ask you something quite personal?" said the sheriff.

"Go ahead."

THE SHERIFF looked at Jim Cassidy, scowling. Jim Cassidy was about thirty. He was thin, tall, rather handsome. His ranch here on Four Mile creek didn't amount to much. Before he had filed on his land, he had worked for a while for Dona Elena. He was unmarried. The sheriff was remembering all this.

"You worked for a while for Dona Elena," he said slowly. "How did you get along with her?"

A flush of color climbed into Cassidy's face. "All right," he muttered.

"Dona Elena had El Comanche," said the sheriff. "Esteban Rojas works for her. Did he say she had given him the horse?"

"That's what he said. But I didn't know what horse he was talking about until he had left town."

The sheriff nodded. He said, "Jim, maybe you weren't nice enough to Dona Elena, when you worked for her. Maybe you should have been more attentive."

"We'll not talk about it," growled Jim Cassidy.

And there the sheriff had his answer, by putting two and two together. Jim Cassidy, a good looking young man, had spurned the advances of Dona Elena. A dangerous thing to do, for Dona Elena was a hot-blooded young woman, and she hadn't forgotten. Her revenge was in the making. She had bought, at the cost of a man's life, a horse no one could ride and live. She had arranged to have the horse fall into the hands of Jim Cassidy.

"Set El Comanche free," suggested the sheriff.

"I've tried to," Cassidy replied. "It doesn't work."

"Then give him away."

"No one wants him."

"Drive him off."

"I've tried to, but can't. He sticks with me, Sheriff. He seems to know he belongs to me. I tell you, El Comanche is an uncanny horse. A wonder horse. You see that corral fence?"

The sheriff nodded.

"With a run, El Comanche can jump it. There's nothing on four legs he can't beat. I've experimented with him. If I rope a steer, the minute the rope settles, El Comanche wheels until it's tight. I was on him the other day when we almost had a stampede. You should have seen El Comanche drive in at the leaders, milling them. A man can't have El Comanche around and not ride him. But look what's happened to every man who's owned him?"

"Owned him?" said the sheriff. "No man's owned him since the death of Bill Holbrook. Logan took him. So did the others you've named."

"Then El Comanche actually belongs to Molly Holbrook, Bill Holbrook's daughter?"

The sheriff considered this for a moment, then nodded. "Actually, yes. But you can't turn El Comanche over to Molly Holbrook."

"Why not, if he's hers?"

"Because those who have had El Comanche, have died."

Jim Cassidy was scowling. "That's what I'm thinking about," he nodded. "And I don't want to die. I don't know Molly Holbrook very well, but if El Comanche actually belongs to her, she's the one I ought to talk to. Maybe she can figure what to do."

"You could shoot him," said the sheriff.

"Look at him again, and say that," suggested Cassidy.

The sheriff stared at the big red stallion. It occurred to him that he had never before seen more of a horse. On El Comanche, a man would be a king. He could feel it, just in looking at the stallion. And he knew that if the choice were his, he would ride El Comanche, and risk anything fate might throw his way. But the horse wasn't his, and deep in his heart, the sheriff was thankful.

"I'll talk to Molly Holbrook," he muttered.

"No," said Jim Cassidy. "I'll talk to her."

JIM CASSIDY arose early the next morning. He had his breakfast, and afterwards went out to the barn and saddled El Comanche. Then, recalling Molly Holbrook, who was young, and who had dark and flashing eyes, and hair like the midnight sky, he went back to his cabin, and shaved, and put on a fresh shirt and neckerchief.

He didn't hurry his ride to the Holbrook ranch, but instead, circled around through the foothills, letting El Comanche run, putting him at some of the hills almost too steep for a horse, then breathing him, and riding on.

Near the Holbrook ranch, he pulled up, and leaning forward, stroked the stallion's neck. "You're too good for me, El Comanche," he murmured. "Too fine a horse. As sure as I kept you, someone would come along and want you. And if I rode you much more, I could never give you up. Then there'd be another shooting scrape, and Jim Cassidy would be dead. You're not worth it, El Comanche. You're not worth that much."

Molly Holbrook came out into the yard a few minutes after Jim rode up. She had seen him coming, and had quickly changed into her polka-dot dress, but Jim didn't know that. Or that she had taken the time to tie a ribbon in her hair. He just looked at her and thought, as he had thought on the few other occasions when he had seen her, that she was a mighty pretty girl.

"It's El Comanche," she cried, staring at the big red stallion. "Where did you get him?"

"That's just it," said Jim Cassidy, swinging to the ground. "I won El Comanche in a poker game from a man whose ownership of the horse was questionable. I talked to the sheriff yesterday, and it's his notion that El Comanche really belongs to you."

Molly's eyes darkened, probably with the memory of what El Comanche had cost her in the loss of her father.

"My father would have sold him, eventually," she murmured. "He had Sultan, and no one or nothing could ever convince him that there was a greater horse than Sultan. Now I have Sultan. What I would do with El Comanche, I don't know."

"That's why I came here," said Jim. "To talk to you about that."

He left El Comanche standing in the yard, knowing the big red horse would wait right there. He moved forward, smiling as he looked at Molly, and thinking it wasn't proper that Molly should have to be running this ranch all alone.

"It's a warm day," said Molly. "There is some lemonade in the cooler."

"Lemonade sounds just about perfect," said Jim Cassidy.

They went inside and neither of them remembered what Bill Holbrook had said, long ago, about the instinctive antagonism between El Comanche and Sultan. Molly said later that it was all her fault, for she had seen evidences of that antagonism at the ranch, many weeks before. Jim blamed himself, for it was he who had left El Comanche untied, and he knew that the average corral was no barrier to the big red horse. But whatever the case, they went into the ranch house and Molly had just poured the lemonade when they heard the first sounds of the fight. The high, shrill screaming, which is like no other sound in the world.

JIM CASSIDY rushed outside, followed by Molly. El Comanche wasn't in the yard where he had been left, but Jim had known he wouldn't be. The sounds he had heard had told him what to expect. He started toward the corral. The top rail of one section was missing, where El Comanche must have kicked it off in his leap. And half across the corral, the two stallions were lunging at one another, slashing out with steel hoofs, churning up a curtain of dust which almost hid them, and screaming in pain. Or in defiance. Or in a challenge to each other.

"A rope," shouted Cassidy. "Where is a rope?"

"In the barn," cried Molly. "Just inside the door."

Cassidy raced for the barn. But even as he hurried to get a rope he doubted that he could catch either horse, or that he could hold either

horse if his cast was good. But it was something to try. Something to do.

There was a crash at the far end of the corral before he reached the barn and by the time he had his rope, both horses were outside with more room for their battle. More room to charge. More room to wheel away. And without a horse of his own, Cassidy's rope was of little value.

For an hour, they say, that fight continued. All across the flat meadow land to the west of the Holbrook ranch. And three other men who witnessed at least a part of it, say there was never such a fight between two horses in all the history of the Camarillo country. El Comanche and Sultan were almost evenly matched. Each was big, and heavy. Each was fast. Quick. And neither would break and run for more than a moment.

The end was inevitable. Jim Cassidy didn't witness it, nor did Molly. They had caught horses and had followed the two stallions across the meadow, but never had been able to get close. Then, as it was apparent to Jim what the end would be, he caught the reins of Molly's horse and led her away. One of the men who worked for Molly brought them word of the final clash.

"They're both done for," said the man. "Both too cut to live. It was Sultan who went down first. That big red horse—" And the man wiped his hand across his face.

"What of him?" asked Jim. "What of El Comanche?"

"He staggered away for a piece," said the man. "Then he just sort of folded. I took care of them both." The man touched his gun.

Back at the ranch house, later, Jim Cassidy shook his head. "I should never have brought him here," he muttered. "Look what I have cost you."

"But it was my fault, said Molly. "I should have remembered the way they hated each other."

This was something to argue over a glass of lemonade, and then over another. It was good lemonade, too. And Molly had a nice smile. And Jim noticed the soft way her arms were rounded. He reached a sudden decision.

"I'll have to do a lot of work for you to make up for the loss of Sultan," he suggested.

"You could ride over some night," Molly agreed. "We could talk about it."

And so, as the oldtimers point out, some good after all came of El Comanche who brought Jim Cassidy and Molly together. But at the same time they insist that El Comanche, to the very end, was El Comanche. And that his shadow was the shadow of death.

BULLETS WERE HIS BLACKSTONE

(Continued From Page 15)

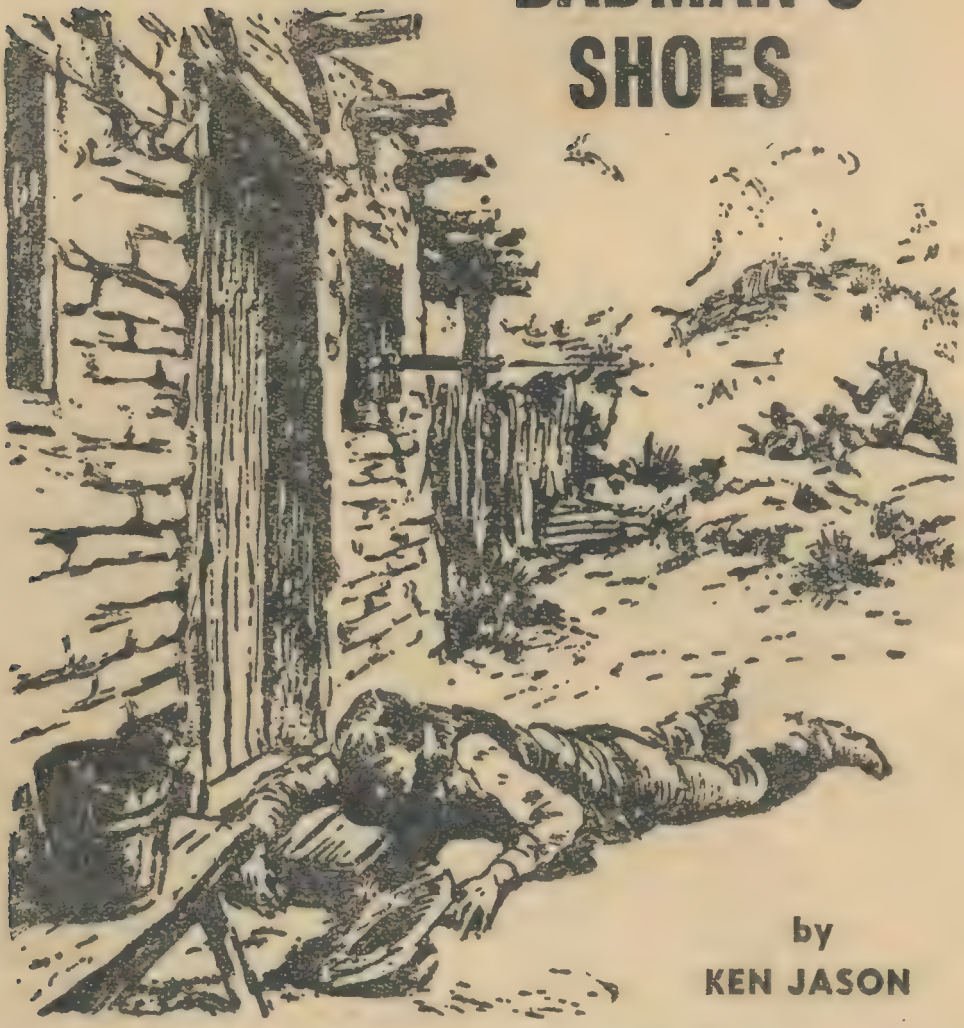
piece from the Bible.

They'd helped Chute too with the business of Ballister's dead, which included Ballister himself. Those of his hired guns who could ride a horse were given that chance, provided they never showed hereabouts ever again. Which was of course empty formality, as was the whole matter of the disposal and tabulation of the dead by Bendton's scarcely nominal officialdom.

Later, no doubt, Liz would get hold of herself and sell all of Homer Ware's possessions and ride away from the place, to begin a new, a normal life elsewhere. But today Liz's heart belonged to Homer Ware. Not as his wife perhaps, but certainly with as deep love as one mortal could know for another.

And when she did ride away, Chute Morley, closing the Bible gently now and yearning to take Liz in his arms and comfort her in a way he did not yet feel it his right to do, hoped that he would deserve to ride with her, to a new life too, where he would become, at last, a man, bringing the much-needed force of law to this raw frontier, with his gun relegated once and for all to memory of a wild and irresponsible youth along the dark trails....

BADMAN'S SHOES



by
KEN JASON

The Ranger kind of liked this killer he was duty-bound to take back—and the killer kind of respected this lawdog who'd trailed him across hades.....

SAM TILTON was in the middle of it before he realized what was happening. He dropped down out of the timber, hitting the clearing at the same time as the driven cattle. He saw the startled way the drovers reined up, how quickly their hands dropped to their guns.

Rustlers, he thought. *I've dropped right smack into the middle of them.*

The cattle slowed, milling for a moment, then placidly settling down to gulping the lush dry grass of the meadow. Raw wind whispered out of the north, whirling dead leaves from the quakies at his back, sending a chill through his lean body. Caution told him, *Duck back into the timber and get the devil out of here. This is none of your blame business.*

But Sam Tilton had been deliberately ignoring this sort of intuitive

warning for ten years, and he did so now. He kneed the sorrel toward the three waiting men, arriving at the same instant that another rider burst out of the timber behind them at full gallop.

Now Sam was glad that his Ranger's badge lay safely hidden, pinned beneath his shirt to his underwear. He was glad that he looked only a fiddle-footed drifter, a little more ragged and gaunt than most, with the whiskers of the past week a tough shadow on his long, hard jaw.

Abruptly he jerked upright, tensing. The rider running down at them from out of the timber was Emory McCurdy, the killer Sam was trailing, the man he had followed these last five months from Laredo, across the Llano Estacado, clear to this high, Colorado plateau.

McCurdy's face was beet-red with a terrible anger and all sense of carefulness was gone from him. His actions were raw, brutal and intemperate as he sent the plunging black among the rustlers, knocking one man that moved to block him, out of his saddle with a slashing blow of the gun-barrel.

"Damn your black soul, Kelso!" he roared. "I figured it was your outfit doing this, but by hell you ain't fighting a woman now! You're fighting me!"

McCurdy held his gun loosely pointing downward. Kelso, a redheaded, burly man, turned cautious by the presence of Sam and by this unexpected, desisive action of McCurdy, sat silent but watchful, his hand resting lightly on the walnut handle of an old Navy Colt.

McCurdy too, was unnerved by Sam's presence. He showed this in the face he turned to Sam. "Where do you fit into this?" he demanded harshly. "I been following only three men. Where'd you come from?"

Sam gestured over his shoulder with a curt nod. "Just rode out of the timber," and waited, going over the description of McCurdy in his mind comparing it with the man before him. The picture on the dodger fit this man's face all right. There were other details: Five feet eleven and a half, a hundred and ninety pounds, dark hair, dark eyes, clean shaven with a scar from eye to jawbone.

McCurdy seemed to gain confidence from his answer. He growled, "Kelso, I ought to cut you down," but his voice lacked conviction. A hesitancy lay in the man, bringing a cruel grin to Kelso's florid features.

Kelso spoke, his voice sibilant, heavy with threat, "Don't try it, friend. We're still two to one. You got a name for being fast, but no one man can beat two. You know that, don't you?"

Sam watched all this, a puzzled frown appearing above his eyes. Doubt stirred in him. This man did not act like Emory McCurdy, the border gunman. He grunted disgustedly, "Pa'a-verin' with rustlers!" and snorted.

Kelso's contempt and Sam's disgust brought a flush to McCurdy's dark, smooth face, again brought the rashness of careless anger to his eyes. It kept building up, but still a nameless something held the man in control. Kelso said, "Well, we'll go on with the cattle."

"No, by hell!" McCurdy's hesitancy seemed suddenly to have disappeared. He was ready now. All the signs were there, the slitted eyes, the tensed muscles, the white knuckles gripping the gun.

Sam's orders were to bring McCurdy in alive. Right now his chances of doing that didn't look too good. His spurs touched the sorrel's ribs. Moving around the rustlers, he drew alongside McCurdy, shoving back the flap of his coat until his gun was exposed. He said, "I like to see things even. Don't seem to be much argument here as to who's right," and watched with hidden amusement the change in Kelso's ruddy countenance.

Abruptly, Kelso wheeled his horse, digging in his spurs, running across the meadow grass with the other man close behind. The man McCurdy had pistol-whipped from his saddle, still

lay motionless on the ground. Flakes of snow whipped down the wind, stinging their faces. Sam grunted, "Kelso ain't much of a hand to look after his men, is he? Reckon this feller will freeze?"

"All right with me if he does." Now, McCurdy turned suspicious, angry eyes on Sam, but they were puzzled eyes too. "Why'd you do that?" he asked flatly.

Sam thought, *Now. Now's the time to take him,* but there was a wicked, jumpy alertness in McCurdy. Sam shook his head slightly. *No. The way he's feeling he'd draw against Wild Bill.*

Sam said mildly, "Why I don't know. Guess it's like I said. I like to see things even."

"Storm's coming. You'll need a place to sleep for a day or two. Help me drive these cattle home and you can stay 'till the weather clears."

AGAINST his will, Sam felt attracted to this dark-haired, wild tempered man. He saw in McCurdy things that he knew himself to contain. He grinned. "Sure. Much obliged. But tell me something. Where I come from they string rustlers up on a cottonwood limb, shoot them or turn them over to the law. You've done nothing but recover your stock. Why?"

McCurdy flushed, eyes burning hotly in his tanned face. "Long story. We'll get these cattle started and I'll try and tell you." Spurring, McCurdy wheeled into the meadow, slapping batwing chaps with a short length of rope, and Sam galloped after. The cattle turned, started back through the timber along the plain trail they had made in entering the meadow. McCurdy stayed twenty yards behind, letting them slow to a shuffle. Sam came up beside him.

"Kelso's ramrodding the Spade Bit outfit. Ernest Morehead is the owner. I'm sitting on water they figure they got to have. This is the way they're taking to drive me out. I ain't been here but a month or so. But my pa homesteaded here when I was just a button. Him and me was too much alike to get along, so five years ago, I pulled out for Texas. Got a letter six months ago from my sister Doris. Said Pa was dead and she needed me at home. So I came."

Sam thought cynically, "Yeah. You came. On the dodge. One place is as good as another to hide."

McCurdy stuck out his hand. "McCurdy's my name. Emory McCurdy."

Sam took the hand. There was no reason for evasion. McCurdy couldn't know the names of every ranger in Texas. He said, "Sam Tilton," watching closely for the telltale gleam of recognition to come to McCurdy's eyes.

It didn't. Temptation to yank the man's hand, to pull him from his saddle, take him here and now, was strong in Sam. The moment passed, and then it was too late. Considering this, Sam did not regret his indecision. Too many things were against precipitate action.

There was the matter of the cattle. Capturing McCurdy now, he would necessarily have to drop them here. Too, with a storm like this in the making, it was no time to start for Texas, no time for camps in the timber. This man was hard, tough with kicking around the southwest. He was a killer.

Even though McCurdy seemed to lack willful brutality that characterized most outlaws, Sam had no doubt that from the moment he took McCurdy, his life would be in constant danger, requiring never ceasing vigilance, sleep only when there was a jail to house his prisoner, or when the prisoner was securely tied. Also, there was a woman dependent on McCurdy. Sam figured he owed it to this sister of McCurdy's to at least let her know where McCurdy was going—and why.

McCurdy was saying, "Spade Bit is one of those great big outfits, that nobody bucks and gets away with it. They own the sheriff and the judge. To accuse them of rustling would be to get laughed at. To kill a Spade Bit man would be suicide. Dorie made

me promise I wouldn't try shooting it out with any of them. Wanted me to quit wearing a gun, but I can't do that."

"Why?"

McCurdy gave him a long, hard look, a look that held edgy suspicion. It was a long time before McCurdy asked, "Could I have stopped them today without a gun?"

"You couldn't have stopped them *with* one, if I hadn't been there."

Reluctantly McCurdy grunted, "Guess you're right."

IN THE FIRST gray of sterile winter's dusk, they rode into the McCurdy ranch. These buildings, constructed of logs from the dark and forbidding spruce pockets behind them, had turned gray with the merciless beat of wind and rain and snow out of the north. McCurdy pushed the cattle through a drift fence that ran along the edge of the timber behind the house. A plume of smoke rose from the stone chimney and was promptly whipped away by the driving wind.

With the horses unsaddled and fed, sheltered in the barn, they tramped through a thin layer of snow to the house. Sam bent and removed his spurs, tossing them beside the stoop. Rising, he caught his breath sharply. McCurdy had mentioned a sister, but he had not prepared Sam for this.

Dark she was, like her brother, dark of eye and hair, with skin white and sharply contrasting. Tall and lithe of body. Sam stood frozen in the doorway, the rawhide latchstring in his hand. The chill blast of winter flowed over him, but the blood pounded hotly through his body.

McCurdy growled, "Damn it, close the door," but Sam did not hear. Dorie's lips curved in a gentle, shy smile, and her lashes dropped, masking the deep and unguarded interest with which she had been watching him. She pushed the door closed, touching his hand with hers momentarily, accidentally, Sam knew, but this did not stop the surge of excitement that poured through him.

McCurdy said, "Sam Tilton's the name he's using, Dorie," attributing Sam's hesitation over his name earlier to a desire on Sam's part to keep his real name hidden. It explained the man's quick acceptance of him, Sam decided.

"He helped me out a little with Kelso. We'll put him up 'till the storm clears."

Sam forced his eyes to leave Dorie. A quick distaste for the task that lay ahead of him came and passed. He sank into a rawhide-covered chair beside the stove, feeling Dorie's glance still on him, softly, searchingly, as if the girl were trying in this short moment to look inside of Sam, to determine what sort of man he was.

Looking up, he met her eyes. Now, her glance held apprehension, and Sam knew from this, that she was aware of McCurdy's past, that she was weighing Sam as a possible source of danger to her brother. But behind this apprehension there was still the excited interest and wonder at this surge of feeling in her that had sprung from nowhere upon the entrance of this stranger into the house.

And suddenly Sam remembered the badge, his job, and what he had to do to this girl. He felt a quick leadenness of spirit possessing him.

McCurdy took a washpan from a nail in back of the stove, filled it partway with hot water from the stove, partway with cold from a bucket, handing it to Sam. "Here. Want to wash?"

Sam took the pan, going outside. The wind howled and snow whirled down the wind in blinding clouds. Sam heard a nicker from one of the horses in the barn, and raised his head alertly, peering into the impenetrable blanket of white. He splashed water on his face, lathering his hands and scrubbing vigorously. He wished he had a razor. Then, he tossed the water out of the pan and re-entered the kitchen, hearing again the shrill nicker from the barn, dismissing it from his mind, thinking only that there were

other horses standing along the drift fence waiting to get in.

He said, "Sounds like some of your horses out there. Heard them whinnying back and forth," and McCurdy slipped into his coat, going out.

DORIE STOPPED from setting dinner on the table and stood in front of Sam, quiet concern and determination in her eyes. "Who are you?" she asked.

Well, it had to come out sometime. Knowing as he spoke how damnably foolish he was being, not caring, he said, "I'm a Ranger. After your brother for murder. Why I'm telling you, I don't know. Now I've got to take him and ride out of here tonight, unless you'll give me your word not to try to help him. As it is, I'll have to tie him up or stay awake all night myself."

He wanted to justify himself to her, seeing the look of revulsion coming into her face, but there was nothing he could say. She cried, "But he's done with all that! He's promised me that he'll do no more killing!"

So that was why McCurdy had been so reluctant to use his gun on the rustlers, finally deciding to only to prevent Kelso from going on with the rustled stock.

Sam said, "I took an oath, ma'am. I am not a judge. Try..."

Sam felt a draft of cold from the door. He leaped to his feet, hand racing to his gun. But the door only closed softly and the draft stopped.

Snatching his coat, Sam rushed to the door. Dorie leaped before him. "One of you will be killed!" she screamed at him.

"Perhaps. It's the way these things go. Let me by, ma'am."

A flurry of shots ran across the yard outside, dimly heard by the two inside. Sam yelled, "What the devil?" bursting out of the door into the blinding snow.

A man blundered into him, striking him with a pounding shoulder, knocking him sprawling in the deepening snow. Sam rolled, clawing at his gun, its handle slippery and cold with melting snow. He heard McCurdy's roar, "No, hang it! Don't shoot! It's the Spade Bit outfit with coal oil and dry wood and matches. They're fixing to burn us out!"

Sam, still rolling, felt the weight of McCurdy as the man leaped on him, whispering now, urgently. "Wait! Help me fight them off and I'll go back to Texas with you. I give you my word. I was listening at the door and heard you talking to Dorie." He shook Sam's shoulders, growing frantic. "Man, say something! I can kill you now!"

Sam relaxed. He said, "All right. Let's get inside."

THERE was no light in the kitchen when McCurdy opened the door, no light to silhouette them for the marksmen outside. But there was the soft, womanly presence of Dorie. She said softly, "I heard. Thank you, Sam."

McCurdy was cursing softly, steadily. "The dirty, crawling sons! It's Kelso mostly. He's the one back of it all. He's the only one that would burn out a man on a night like this. He's the only one who would fight a woman for a two-bit waterhole."

Sam murmured, "Don't waste time cussing him. Let's get to these windows, straining his eyes against the blinding white wall of snow outside. He snapped a shot at a shadowy figure and in answer a shot blossomed in the dark, the bullet striking the window frame and showering Sam with splinters. He called softly into the velvet blackness behind him, "Girl, get down. Stay away from these windows."

McCurdy laughed. "Not Dorie, man. She's got a rifle over there across the room. She'll use it, too."

Fear for the girl stabbed through Sam, and pride too. Blind anger raced through his veins at the men outside who would raid a ranch in a blizzard, burning, killing, thinking nothing of it if a woman went down beneath their guns. He fired again, saw a darker

shape in the black of the night stumble and melt into the ground.

A call came out of the night, "Give it up, McCurdy, and you'll get off with your lives. Fight, and we'll kill you all." —Kelso's bull below.

Again Sam felt the draft of cold air on his back, turned, heard the soft closing of the door. He started to call out, "McCurdy! Come back!" but halted in time. Dorie must not know that her brother had melted out into the blinding snow to tackle this alone.

Sam seemed to be with the man, slipping from cover to cover, searching out the man who was responsible for this. He waited for the shots, the sharp burst of them, that would tell him McCurdy had been found. Silence met his listening ears.

Dorie said, "Emory, we can't beat them. There's too many," and in the ensuing silence, seemed to be waiting for McCurdy's reply.

Panic was in her voice then. "Emory! Where are you?"

Sam said softly, "He's gone, Dorie. Slipped out five minutes ago. He's gone after Kelso and Morehead. He figures the others will quit if they're dead." He was weighing the loyalty of the men to the Spade Bit against the Spade Bit's loyalty to them as typified by Kelso's desertion of the man McCurdy had pistol whipped this afternoon, deciding that McCurdy had guessed it right.

He moved across the room, laid a hand on her arm. "He overheard us talking. He knows he's got to go back with me. He's doing this for you, Dorie, so he can leave you safe."

SUDDENLY her face buried itself against his hard chest. A sob shook her. Naturally, it seemed, Sam's arms went about her. They were standing this way when they heard the faint, distant crack of a gun. Just a single shot, then after nearly a minute, another. Dorie stiffened in his arms, waiting for what would come.

Then a whole flurry of shots, racketed across the yard. Faintly, a shout drifted to them, "Damn him, he got Kelso an' Morehead both. Let's high-tail out of here!"

Sam ran to the door, flung it open. He heard their high yells as they pulled out of the yard, the drumming of their horses' hooves muffled by the soft carpet of snow. Racing, he went into the yard, across it, seeing the fading shapes of their horses.

Behind him came the soft running footfalls of Dorie, as she followed him. He stumbled over something soft, went to his hands and knees in the snow. Dorie cried out. Sam struck a match and looked at the face of the man on the ground. Kelso. Dead.

He said, "He's around here close. Call out, Dorie."

She cried, "Emory! Emory! Are you all right?"

McCurdy's face came out of the gloom, faint and weak. "Here."

Sam found Dorie kneeling beside him. McCurdy murmured, "You're safe now, Dorie. With Kelso and Morehead gone, they'll let you alone."

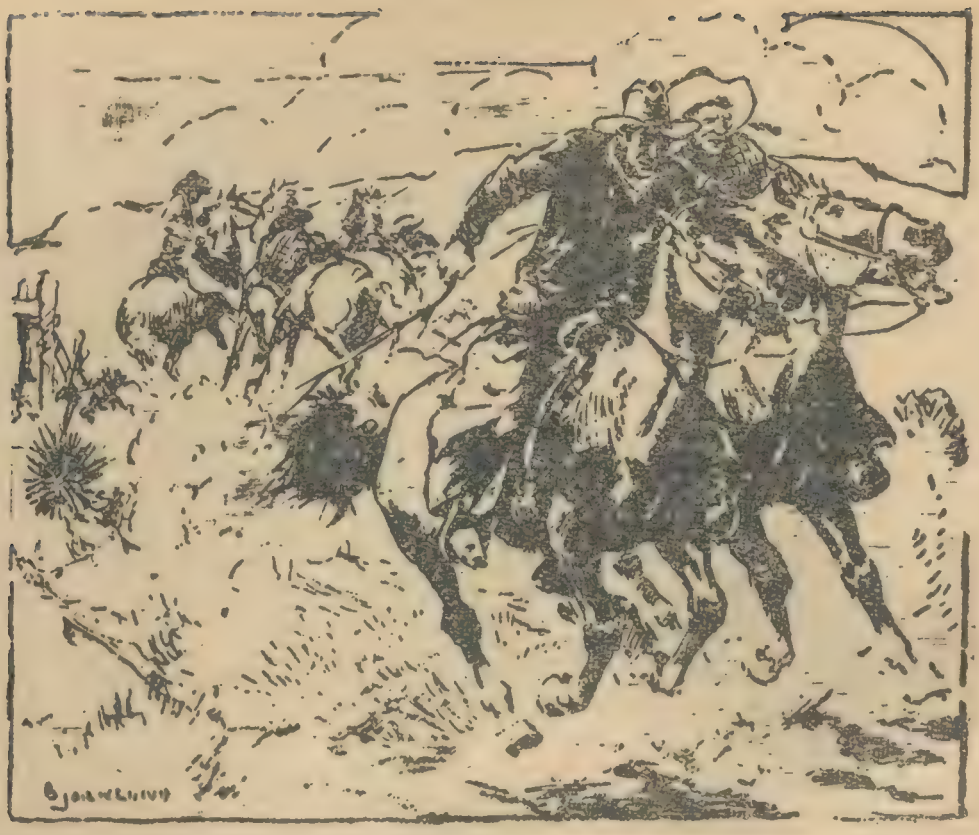
Sam struck another match. McCurdy grinned feebly at him. "I guess the law can't have me, Tilton. Your job is done." His face twisted with pain. "Come closer, Sam."

Sam bent nearer, and McCurdy went on, "I'm not blind, Sam. You and Dorie looked at one another tonight the way a thirsty man looks at water. Stay, Sam. Stay and look after her. This is a good place. It'll make you a better life than manhunting."

A whole new vista of what life could mean opened up for Sam in that instant. McCurdy went on weakly, speaking now to Dorie, "Tell him to stay, Sis. Tell him! I haven't much time left." His voice faded but presently came back, weaker now: "I let you down on that promise I made, but I guess I'd do it again..."

The match burned Sam's fingers. He didn't feel it. Time stood still as he waited for Dorie's words. In the dying light, he saw tears coursing unashamedly down her cheeks. She said timidly, "Will you, Sam?"

He threw the match down and moved close to her. And what he did next gave her the answer she wanted....



THE HELLIONS by CHARLES APPEL

THEY RODE hard that day. Shortly after sunset, they swung down in The Corner, the only thing that could be called a town this side of the desert. They saw the girl, standing at the foot of the saloon steps, looking up at the lanky cowboy on the veranda. The dim light from the saloon delineated her white throat, because of her standing with her chin up like that, and that was why they forgot what had been on their minds for the past week.

"Geez," Marty muttered.

"Geez is right," Link said.

The pale light that came out of the batwings made a consideration of her profile too. Against the dark shadows, her features were small and perfect. Only her lips were perhaps a little full in proportion. Her hair was dark and back tight to a shiny bun. She was dressed in regular female ranch attire, open-necked blouse and jeans and boots. And she stood with assurance, and fearlessness, and spirit.

Those big hauls of gold dust some of the legendary stage robbers had lifted, were what interested Marty and Link. So maybe they'd ought to turn night-riders too.....

Marty and Link hadn't seen a member of the opposite sex in a tolerable time, that was their trouble.

And they doubted if they'd ever seen a looker the likes of this one.

Best of all, the girl seemed to be arguing with the tall cowboy. And the tall cowboy was favoring her with a sneering smile, in one corner of his mouth, and he had one eyebrow raised coldly at her. And he wore his battered stetson at a salty angle, the way a son would who thought he was pretty good. Pretty good, especially, with the ladies.

"No," she said.

"No, eh," the cowboy said.

Marty and Link were almost directly across the street from the saloon. It was their objective, but they always hitched their horses somewhere other than where they were stopping; this prevented anybody who might identify their horses from finding them so quick, gave them a roundabout chance to escape if somebody wanted to corner them. It had been, in fact, the method of several notorious outlaws.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" the girl demanded.

"Oh now baby," the cowboy said in a mock whine, "you're not going to go cantankerous on me now, are you?"

Marty and Link were simultaneously moved to look at each other. And as one, they hiked up their gun-belts —they each wore a single .45.

The girl whirled petulantly so that her back was to the cowboy.

"Who came over here after who?" the cowboy said. "I'm having a quiet little drink, when who comes busting through the butterflies but Little Miss Nosey. 'Come outside,' she demands, so outside I come. 'You'd better wait at the hotel,' I tell her. 'No,' she says to that. And then she says why can't *I* leave *her* alone. Now I ask you."

She whirled back at him. "You know what I mean. You know very well what I mean."

"Look, baby—" the cowboy started down off the veranda toward her.

"Don't touch me!"

"Maybe you'd better leave the lady alone," Marty said.

He'd led the way across the street and he spoke as he stepped up onto the boardwalk. Marty was about the same height as Link but built more solid. He had a blocky face, whereas Link's face was lean, pinched. If one of them was the leader, it would have been Marty.

The tall cowboy had taken the girl's arm in long, strong fingers. She gave a hard yank to try to free her arm, but this was of absolutely no use. With the cowboy's eyes unwaveringly on her eyes, she might not, however, have put as much force into the attempt as she made it appear, for she did not even turn her face aside when he kissed her.

"Maybe you don't hear so good, mister," Marty said.

Link didn't say anything, he acted. He stepped up and slapped the cowboy's shoulder a hard one.

The fellow completed the long kiss before he looked at Marty and Link. Then he looked back at the girl, who had a dazed expression in her eyes, which remained transfixed on the cowboy's face.

"Are these some friends of yours?" the cowboy asked the girl very quietly.

"Is this fella botherin' you, Ma'am?" Marty addressed the girl.

"Yes, he is," she replied at once in a husky voice.

Link spoke then for the first time.

"Get movin', fella," he said to the cowboy.

A couple patrons had come to the batwings at sound of the conversation. Townsmen, of which there were few in The Corner to begin with and fewer still abroad this weekday night, had paused here and there along the street to see what was up. The cowboy noticed this. He turned his attention again to Marty and Link.

"Look, lads," he said, "I don't usually like strangers even when they don't get in my hair. And when they *do* get in my hair, in the fashion in which you two are—*I just plain get good and mad!*"

With the emphasized conclusion of his little speech, the cowboy had very suddenly gone into violent action. He batted Marty's and Link's stetsons down in their eyes; he grabbed both their guns, as they reached for their hats, and tossed the weapons across the street; he brought a knee up into Marty's belly, and jabbed a fist a mile into Link's middle; and then, with his long arms, he gave them both a vigorous shove backwards off the boardwalk, so that they ended like busted-open potato-sacks in the middle of the dust-deep street.

SEATED in the jail, where the sheriff had delivered them on the complaint of the tall cowboy, and which was so small that two men could scarcely bend their knees to sit down, and which stank so that they kept their noses and eyes constantly wrinkled up, Marty and Link took stock.

"What in the devil," Marty said huffily, to bat some life into his spirits, which had reached a low point during the night, but which had, with the faint glow of dawn in the barred slot of a window, begun now to stir again.

"What in the devil is right," Link ground out, hunching his shoulders against a shiver that tried to climb his spine.

This could have been called Chapter Two in the Adventures of Marty Johnson and Link Barr, Young Bandits. Up until about two months ago, Marty and Link had been cow nurses. At the big Double Seven, back in Texas. It was while riding for the DS that they'd become saddlepards. And, both being of an imaginative turn of mind, began whipping each other up over the idea of "what are we going to do, go to our graves tailing a bunch of beef?"

So they'd got talking; and reading about the colorful careers of some of the badmen who were currently building reps for gunspeed and daring, many of whom were in their early twenties, no older than Marty and Link; and thinking about those big hauls of gold dust and nuggets some of the outlaws had lifted off stages (why, for cripes sake, a man could live a life of ease on what he took in a single good holdup!); and, finally, they'd seen the eyes of the young ladies light up at mention of some of those dark-trail dandies.

So they'd got practicing with shiny new sixguns, and they'd invested the remainder of their savings in a couple good strawberry roans, complete with colored-glass-studded saddles. And, finally, one day, they'd ridden forth, and their brand-new, dove-white stetsons glittered with red and green and blue and yellow glass jewels too.

They'd tried the holdup first. They tried to think of some clever, complicated way of pulling it, but such a scheme wouldn't come. So they simply went out on a trail they knew the overland used, and selected a boulder to wait behind, and leapt out, guns in hand, when the stage showed.

The trouble was, all hell broke loose. The gun-guard cut loose at them with a shotgun. The driver, while still sucking in his team, threw down on them with a sixshooter. And two passengers, on whose shirts tinstars glinted high-noon sunlight, were swinging out of the stage before it had full-stopped, and taking to the two horses hitched to the rear.

Marty and Link had been running from those two lawmen for the past week. And now, having at last apparently shaken them, they were, ironically, in jail for taking the part of a lady in distress—

"We ain't tough enough, is our trouble," Marty said.

"I know we ain't," Link said.

"You can't go around tryin' to save ladies in distress if you ain't plenty good and tough."

"I know you can't."

"You know what we got to do, don't you. We got to toughen ourselves up. I mean before we try anything else."

"I know we do—"

"All right—out," the sheriff interposed.

He'd appeared without Marty and Link noticing, and he was unlocking the door as they whirled toward him.

"Out?" Marty stammered.

"That's right, I'm settin' yuh free," the sheriff said. "What more do you want. Come on, out."

A COUPLE whiskies put them on their feet again. They placed a foot up on the rail and they wrapped their fingers around the glass and they tossed it off at a single gulp. The sock of the powerful liquor liked to tore the lining out of Marty's stomach, and his eyes bugged precariously. And Link looked like a man who has been shot at and he doesn't know whether he's been hit and he is waiting to see if he will fall over dead. But in a few minutes the flush of it went up to the roots of their hair, and it had put new guts under their gun-belt, new stiffening up their backbone.

They might not have felt the need to down the firewater at a single draught if it hadn't been for the hardcases at the far end of the bar. Four of them, there were, back in the shadows there. And they were also having whiskey for breakfast, but obviously not to bolster their courage, obviously rather out of habit, and they'd been watching Marty and Link. So that need had been upon Marty and Link to look especially tough.

"Ridin' far?" one of the hardcases abruptly said, but in such a quiet, dull voice that Marty and Link weren't sure he was speaking to them. He must have been, though, because there wasn't anybody else in the place—

"Mebbe," Marty said, and had to tug his stetson into a new tightness to cover his unease at the sound of his voice producing such a cagey rejoinder.

The speaker drained his glass without taking his bloodshot eyes off Marty.

Then he said to his companions, "They look okay to me."

"Meanin' jest what?" Link contributed, though the remark had not been addressed to him. But the whiskey had started a number of such salty phrases boiling in his brain, and the impulse had been strong in him to release one of them.

The hardcase ignored Link's sally. He said to Marty, "You men wouldn't be interested in picking up some easy money by any chance."

"Such as?" Link replied at once, without having thought, actually, because the whiskey had reached his brain good now, but his words happened to be suitable.

"You figure they'd be salty enough to handle the job?" another of the hardcases said to the speaker. His eye flickered, with what could have been devilish humor, but the grim cast of his pock-marked face completely belied this.

These, Marty thought suddenly, must be members of a wild bunch. Maybe even Butch Cassidy's. That, Marty's thoughts roiled on, was what they'd ought to join up with, a wild bunch. A hole-in-the-wall horde. Until they knew their way around better. Plenty of time to be free-lances, after they were seasoned sixgun wizards—

"Yeah, such as," Marty repeated Link's challenge, since no other came at once to mind, and his brain was becoming somewhat whiskey-fogged now too.

The speaker rang a couple of coins on the bar turning away from it and said,

"You want to come in the back room? We'll talk about it..."

AND SO Chapter Three was initiated. Marty and Link swaggered into the back room of the saloon with the four hardcases, and they'd scarcely slouched into chairs at the big round poker table when the somethings crashed onto the back of their heads.

They came to out in a draw somewhere. The first picture Marty had was the wall of layered sandstone.

Then he found that he and Link were lying on the ground in this draw.

"Hey," Marty muttered.

"Huh?" Link said.

The sun was a hot, flaming ball just above the embankment. The boys blinked against its glittering rays.

"What in the devil," Marty said.

He sat up, felt his head. Shook his head.

"Boy oh boy," Link said feebly, also sitting up, also putting a hand to the head.

They leapt, however, to their feet when the voice came.

"How are you men feeling now?" It was that same dull voice. The hardcase who'd spoken to them before. Where had that been? Back in that saloon? Back in that saloon, that had been it.

Marty and Link looked all around them, whirling in the dazzling sunset glow that filled the narrow draw to overflowing, before they saw the speaker.

He was up on the top of the sandstone cut. He and the three others, and they dropped and slid easily down beside Marty and Link.

"What in the devil," Marty said.

"Get the bottle, Jackson," the hardcase said over his shoulder to one of the others. "I think what we probably all need is a good stiff drink."

"What in the devil happened?" Link blurted.

"You men had one too many back in town," the hardcase said in a silky tone.

Marty patted around on the top of his head until he came to the big, mesa-like lump on the back of it.

"What I want to know is," he grumbled, "how did I get this here billiard ball on the back of my head."

"Boy howdy, me too," Link said, discovering, at that moment, the protuberance on his own pate.

"Liquor will hit a man hard sometimes," the silky-voiced fellow said.

"Didn't any whiskey put *this* lump on *my* head!" Marty growled.

One of the hardcases had poured whiskey into a half-dozen tincups that he'd set out on a flat boulder.

"A couple more whiskies'll take that swelling down for you," the hardcase said, offering one of the cups to Marty.

"Not for me, no-sir." Marty shook his head.

"We're drinking, mister," the hardcase said. His tone had a cold, serious edge now.

"Not for me neither," Link said, as a tincup was proffered him, in the hardcase's other hand.

The latter's three companions were all standing behind him waiting with their drinks in their right hands, with their eyes narrowed on Marty and Link.

"Well, jest one, then," Marty said abruptly, accepting the cup.

"Not for me," Link repeated.

"We're drinking, mister," the hardcase also repeated, but addressing Link this time.

LINK SCUFFED his boots in the lava dust that covered the floor of the draw.

"Well, jest the one then."

"Up on top," the hardcase said out of the corner of his mouth to one of his companions after the tincups had been emptied.

The fellow nodded and climbed the embankment, leaned on his stomach peering off somewhere.

"What's that?" Marty said as his eye lit on an iron-bound chest over to one side of the draw.

"That's what we're going to carry our gold in," the leader said softly, "after this job we're going to pull." He was holding the bottle out. "Have another."

"Not for me, no-sir."

"Me neither. Boy howdy," Link said. "I can hardly stand up now."

"Have another."

The fellow up on the embankment suddenly said, "Okay."

"Me, I'm going to have to set down," Marty said, looking around dizzily for maybe a boulder or something to sit on.

So with the whiskey and all that

blazing, blinding sunshine, Marty and Link didn't know *what* the devil. It must have been the cool and the dark, after the sun went below the horizon, that finally cleared their brains and their vision.

What their vision, in any case, next revealed to them was a campfire, and a number of grim faces in the light of it. After that they saw the two men working with the rope. There was cottonwood fifty feet from the blaze, and the firelight limned it in ghostly outline against the black night. And the two men were working the rope up over a big horizontal limb of it.

Without knowing anything about what this was for, both Marty and Link felt big, hard lumps form, at sight of it, in the pit of their stomachs, and then go up into their throats.

"Hey," Marty managed to gasp.

"One of them's comin' around!" one of the men at the fire snarled at the men with the rope.

"That's all I want tuh see," another slow, hoarse, heavy voice came. "I want 'em tuh savvy what's happenin' to 'em. I want 'em to feel that hemp tightenin' on their scrimy gullets."

"Now what," Link gulped.

"The other one's woke up now, too! You got that noose set?"

"Cripes," Marty said.

These obviously weren't the men they'd been siding, Marty realized now. Was this another wild bunch maybe? Had they somehow been captured from their former saddlemates by a rival hole-in-the-wall crew, or something?

A giant of a man had come over to stand spread-legged in front of Marty and Link.

"Well, gentlemen." This was he of the big, buzz-saw voice, and a heavy weight of sarcasm in it now.

ONE OF HIS hairy paws suddenly shot out and lifted Marty from the ground by a fistful of shirt. Link came up in the same way, the giant's left fist turning his shirtfront into a ripping ball.

"A couple of Billy the Kid's, *eh*."

"My name ain't Billy the Kid, it's Marty Johnson—and this is my saddlepard, Link Barr," Marty stammered

"Well, now ain't that nice. Marty Johnson and Clink Barr—"

"It's 'Link,' not 'Clink,'" Link supplied, but a little uncertainly.

"Oh but I think 'Clink' is more suitable." The giant said this in a mock sissy manner. But he abruptly jutted his rock-like chin into Link's face and stormed, "And I think 'Noose' would be even more suitable!" And over his shoulder he shouted, "Yuh got that hangrope hung, boys?"

"It's—jest about—set," one of the rope men ground out, jerking the slipknot tight.

"So you figgered you could rob the starving widows and orphans of Corner range, and wouldn't nobody do nothin' about it, eh." The giant's voice had become very gentle and reasonable now. But his fists began to turn Marty's and Link's shirts into harder knots.

"Widows and orphans—?" Marty stammered.

The giant said over his other shoulder, "Bring that chest over here, Cholly."

"The folks of Corner range scrape up every last half-dollar they kin spare, to help out the widows and kids of the men killed in the cattle war—and you gentlemen figger you'd druther use the money to buy liquor with."

The iron-bound chest—the same that the hardcase had said they were going to haul gold off in—was dumped at their feet, its lid flopping, empty.

"Now jest what did you gentlemen do with the money you ain't bought liquor with?"

"We didn't buy no liquor—"

The sound of his shirt ripping plus the constriction of his throat that this entailed, cut Marty off.

"And I don't reckon you was drunk when we found yuh in that draw, neither!" the giant suddenly shouted in their faces.

"Look, friends," a man who was standing behind the giant's shoulder

interposed reasonably, "yuh cain't take it with yuh. We're goin' tuh string yuh up whether yuh talk or not. But in the meantime them widows an' orphans might jest as well be benefittin' from that money you stole."

"Money?" Link said. That happened to be all he could think of to say. Because his brain had begun to whirl.

That happened, also, to have an effect on the giant like a red flag waved in front of an outlaw bull. He roared, *"String 'em up!"* He roared it with a rending fury that made the very ground tremble under Marty's and Link's feet.

At least it felt to them as if it was the ground that was trembling.

"STRING 'EM UP!"

The giant had shoved Marty and Link from him with a violence that dumped them back over a log, bounced them in a jabby tangle of buckbrush. Then he had stormed over to them and began kicking at them with his great boots.

"We didn't take any money," Link said.

IN NEXT to no time the men had dragged Marty and Link out and were busying hangnooses onto their necks. Then they shoved them up onto the backs of horses, and led the horses immediately over under the cottonwood, and pulled the slack rope up tight, so that Marty could feel the rough of the hemp ripping past his jaw. He was about to say that there had been a mistake somewhere, but the tautened noose cut off his words.

Link barely got out, "Holy smoke."

The giant had just yelled, "Slap them critters' rumps!" when the commotion began on the outer edge of the mob.

"Riders," Marty heard somebody mutter.

"Mebbe these two was part of a wild bunch," another voice said.

"Yeah," another said.

Marty and Link heard the pound of hoofs then too. They heard hammers clicking back on sixguns around them, and Winchesters being levered.

"Get clear of the firelight," another one said.

The ropes went loose on Marty's and Link's necks as their captors moved away into the shadows.

"So their mates want to rescue 'em, eh," the giant's growl came. "Okay, let's see 'em do it!"

Who it turned out the riders were, however, were the sheriff and a posse.

"Ho!" the sheriff whooped as he and a half dozen deputies hove into the firelight.

"What is this, Herman," the lawman said at sight of the giant and the mob of townsmen. His eye lit on Marty and Link under the cottonwood. "You ain't takin' the law into your own hands by any chance."

The giant and the other townsmen had put their guns away but not their belligerence.

"We caught 'em redhanded." the giant growled, "an' we're stringin' 'em up!" He turned to a companion. "Show the sheriff the chest, Angy!"

Who it turned out one member of the posse was, however, was the tall cowboy from whose clutches Marty and Link had attempted to rescue the lovely young lady in distress.

"Are you trying to say, Herman," this fellow interjected, "that those two lame-brains—" jerking a thumb at Marty and Link "—could have broken into the bank, cracked that big safe, and made off unnoticed with that chest—much less planned the job in the first place? That's really a laugh."

"What do you mean 'lame-brains'," Link blustered. It had suddenly seemed to him that, since he and Marty were the center of this affair, they should have some voice in it.

"We found 'em with the chest, didn't we?" the giant stormed. "Soused to the gills, sittin' right next to the chest!"

Some smart hole-in-the-wall crowd obviously got them drunk, planted them where they'd be easily found and

(Please Turn To Page 101)

THE LUCKY CHANCE

by STEVE FRAZEE

The bunch of toughs from San Juan weren't the only ones—every man in town tried to move in on the Lucky Chance!

MAUREEN CARMICHAEL lost her husband in the fall of '81. Alamosa Brannigan, Shorty McGregor, and I were celebrating Old Grunt's birthday when it happened. Old Grunt, a prospector who talked occasionally to his burro and seldom to human beings, was not present. We had not told him that this was his birthday.

Alamosa could talk an Iron Mike out of a pipeful of tobacco. There were about a hundred people in Mormon Forge then. Alamosa had gone among the women, telling them of poor Old Grunt, about to face his sixtieth birthday, lonely, dreaming of a love affair that had gone haywire when he was a youth on the banks of the Wabash, or someplace. Old Grunt was really a Pittsburgh man, about forty-five, gray whiskers and all.

The women rose high to Alamosa's story and his dark Irish good looks. It was a shame about Old Grunt, they said. Mrs. McGuire baked a cake from the last of her flour, and cried about the broken course of love. Or perhaps, as Shorty said, she looked at Alamosa and cried about McGuire.

There was more food in our cabin than had ever been there before. Alamosa was eating biscuits, hot from Mrs. Crow's Dutch oven. He broke them, filled them with Mrs. Jayson's wild raspberry jam, and took them at a bite.

"Would you look at the ragged millionaires," he mumbled. "And us eating like poor folks."

Since our window opening had no window, it was no trouble to see the men panning and sluicing on Mormon Creek. Let them discover, as we had discovered, that all the West was not underlaid with gold.

I used my belt knife to carve the chicken Mrs. Preston had roasted. Some uneasy thoughts struck me as I ate. We had "borrowed" Old Grunt's burro, Winthrop, and tied it outside, but Old Grunt was off in the mountains. Still, since Old Grunt seldom talked to anyone, we might get by with this shenanigan.

"Let's drift," I said. "Head for the San Juan, or—"

"After this, we may have to." Alamosa grinned.

Shorty McGregor said something, but his mouth was so full of venison roast and soft Scotch growls that we could not understand him. Even when seated on a small packing box, Shorty towered over Alamosa and me. We understood him well enough when he looked at the creek and shook his head.

EXCEPTING Bill Carmichael's quartz claim, there were only colors here. The gulch was wide and grassy, a natural place for camping and resting tired animals after the heart-in-the-mouth grind down from Battle Pass. One wagon had stopped here, and then another because there was company, and now we had a camp, with people who believed gold was where you found it.

We heard some shots from the direction of Max Resigh's tent saloon. That was unusual, but not odd enough to move us from the feast.

Shorty said, "If we could find a rich mine like Carmichael's—"

"Lode mining!" Alamosa showed pain. "For chunks of gold as big as your beard, Shorty, would you have a man prying and pounding at hard granite all day?" He took a piece of chicken skin from my plate. Before eating it, he held it against the light. "Look at the gold of that now!"

A little later I saw Pete Carvel running up the creek, shouting at the miners.

"Never mind," Alamosa said when I started to rise. "Let them with news come to us." He leaned into the window opening and yelled at Carvel to come over.

Pete was panting, bug-eyed with importance, but the sight of the food on our table threw him off track. "Hey!" he said, "I thought this was Old Grunt's party."

"Grunt is out in the trees, sleeping off the fine feast he had," Alamosa said. "What's the news?"

"Max Resigh shot Carmichael dead in an argument over whiskey, and poor Bill with a wife and three kids."

Our birthday stunt looked pretty shoddy to me.

"Carmichael's temper was due to get him shot," Alamosa said. He cut a dried apple pie in two and stood up with a half in his hands. "But I guess we'd best hang Resigh."

Shorty rose, ducking his head to miss the ridge log. "Aye," he said.

"It was a fair fight," Carvel said.

"We'll hang Resigh anyway. Saloonmen are the root of all evil," Shorty said. He never drank.

"Resigh done left camp."

Shorty and Alamosa sat down. Shorty wiped his beard with the back of his hand, and took the other half of dried apple pie. "That saves us trouble then."

Alamosa began to pick his teeth with a splinter. "That's a fine claim of Bill's."

We looked quickly at each other.

"Here, Pete." Alamosa shoved a gooseberry pie at Carvel. None of us liked gooseberries. "There's some boys farther up the creek that ought to know."

Carvel went away, shouting his news between bites of the pie.

Shorty stopped eating. He tried to rake some of the tangles from his beard. "A wicked country, this," he muttered. "Ah, the poor lass, alone with those three girls."

"And that rich claim," I said.

Shorty nodded. "No woman can work a mine, of course. Now if the three of us can get the quick claim deed—"

"Quit claim," I said.

"He means 'quick,' all right." Alamosa was giving us the narrow eye. That Alamosa Brannigan would be the one to watch, what with his clean good looks and honeyed tongue.

Shorty wagged his beard. "What a

shame if the poor widow lost her ground to scalawags."

"Indeed," Alamosa said.

I studied that Sligo man. They are clever up there in that part of Ireland. "A man would think you consider yourself a saint," I said, "and me and Shorty scalawags."

"Would you now?" Alamosa grinned.

WE WENT to the widow's cabin after sunset. No one was sluicing. Mormon Creek was sparkling bright. We walked through the scent of the long-leaf pine, with the solid blue of the spruce trees looking down on us from the high slopes. Alamosa looked frequently up there. Spruce trees, he said, were the cleanest, freest things that lived, and when they died, they left no grief behind.

Most of Mormon Forge was at the Carmichael cabin, the men loafing outside, the women bustling inside. I saw Mrs. Carmichael sitting near the fireplace, with Katie and Mora beside her. They were the two younger ones, dark-haired like her mother. Crusheen, the oldest, was sitting on a stump behind the cabin. I saw her wave away two women who wanted to come inside.

Maureen Carmichael was then about thirty, a well formed, dark-haired woman with none of the loud heartiness of most of the women who came off Battle Pass in wagons.

We had often wondered why she had married a loud mouth with a rattlesnake temper; but she had, and now Carmichael was dead and buried, and she was left with three daughters in a mining camp that could not last the winter.

"I will tender the regrets for all of us, if that is agreeable," Alamosa said.

It suited me. Shorty combed his beard with his fingers, and said that he would just go along to see that the regrets were properly stated.

I went over to the quartz outcrop. Carmichael had never let anyone close to it. Now there was quite a group there, sort of breaking off specimens with rocks. The stuff looked pretty rich to me.

Bunker Talboom, a big beef-faced freighter, was really working the outcrop over with Carmichael's pick. Men like Talboom had no respect for anything, I thought, as I gathered up a few samples.

"A terrible shame it is," Talboom said, swinging the pick. "I'm tempted to marry the poor woman, so the three tykes will be provided for decent like."

Someone laughed. "To say nothing of the claim."

Crusheen came over just then. Her hair was crinkly orange, like Carmichael's, and she had the same I'll-fight-you look in her eyes.

"Howdy, Crusheen," I said.

"Howdy nothing! All of you get away from Pa's mine!"

Talboom grinned and went right on picking.

"You, Bullface! Stop that right now!"

Bullface. That fitted. I laughed. None of the others laughed. This Talboom was known as a rough brawler.

"Go back to your ma, sister," Talboom growled, and gave me a red-eyed glare.

"You put that pick down!" Crusheen said.

WHEN TALBOOM swung the pick again, she hit him in the belly with a rock she had been holding behind her back. It was about baseball size. Talboom dropped the pick and doubled over. He said, "Umm!" in a long grunt. Then the beef color ran wild in his neck, and he tried to grab Crusheen.

She whirled away with her pigtails flying. When Talboom lunged to catch her, I tripped him. He came up cursing, ready to kill me. By that time I had the pick. He grabbed a short-handled shovel, and we squared away.

It was not a pretty scene that Mrs. McGuire broke up. She could roar louder than Talboom. "For shame! For shame!" she bellowed. "And be-

fore a house of sorrow!" She grabbed a piece of drill steel and charged us. "The poor Bill Carmichael not cold yet in his grave, and beasts snarling over his possessions!"

Mrs. McGuire, heaven rest her soul, scattered everybody, particularly Talboom and me. She could not catch us, being a heavy woman, but she threw the steel and hit Talboom in the legs with it as he ran beside me.

"Did I say something about getting married?" he asked, when we were safe across the creek.

Shorty returned to our cabin not long afterward. "That Alamosa," he said, "is still tendering sympathy. If we are to buy that claim together—"

"With what? We were below the bottom of the rice sack a week ago."

Shorty scowled. He waved flies away from the chicken and put it against his beard to gnaw. "The winters must be fearful here," he mused. "A woman with three helpless lasses could not possibly stay here then."

"We'll lease the claim," I said. "Maybe that's what Alamosa is arranging now."

"Aye! For himself, no doubt. A smooth tongue is like a serpent that striketh—that coileth—lurketh—"

The beard overflowing that chicken carcass, and the burring of Shorty's false piety caused me to choke on the huckleberry pie I intended to eat before Alamosa returned.

"Maureen is staying," Alamosa said when he came back. He threw his slouch hat toward one of the bunks. "She will not deal in any way for the claim."

"No doubt you tried every way," Shorty grumbled. "So it's 'Maureen' now?"

"She is a woman of spirit," Alamosa said.

We had reason to be suspicious of Alamosa that fall. He was the only man in Mormon Forge who was ever invited inside the Carmichael cabin. Shorty said he was cutting us out of that claim, the Lucky Chance, and that's what I thought too. Every man in town tried to get the Lucky Chance, but Maureen Carmichael shook her head.

A BUNCH of toughs on their way home from a bad summer in the San Juan moved right in on the Lucky Chance, and started to work it. The three of us ran them off. Alamosa shot one of them in the arm. After that Maureen was not bothered by outside scalawags.

Fire-frost ran through the aspens and the scrub oak brush. Freighters came off Battle Pass with snow on their tarpaulins. We were pretty hungry, until Alamosa caught three greenhorns and sold our claims for two hundred dollars. The new owners did not stay long. Over Shorty's objections, Alamosa retained custody of the money.

Somebody found a nugget forty miles downriver, at Fawn Hollow. In three days, the Carmichaels, Old Grunt, and the three of us had Mormon Forge to ourselves. Before the exodus Maureen bought Prosser's store. The living quarters at the rear were still unroofed, and the only stock Prosser left was salt and some sacks of very old beans that would not soften up in three days' cooking.

We could not watch Maureen and the kids trying to put a pole roof on their new home, so we went down and did the job. Old Grunt helped. He was broke then, and we were feeding him.

Talboom was the last freighter off the pass that fall. He was loaded with grub, headed for Fawn Hollow, but Maureen talked him into selling everything to her, pointing out the fact that Battle Pass might be closed with snow before Talboom could get to the new camp and return.

After the deal, Talboom tried to introduce other considerations. Maureen grabbed Carmichael's old Sharps rifle. She ran Talboom out of the store and once around his wagon, with him howling for her not to shoot. We rushed down when we heard the racket.

Maureen's face was dead white against the glossy blackness of her hair. When she saw us coming, Alamosa running in the lead like a wild man, he dropped the rifle and ran to Mora, the youngest girl, who was crying on the porch.

"Hang him!" Shorty said.

Alamosa pointed toward the pass, like the Utes once did when facing white men. Talboom put that freight wagon out of town faster than I had ever seen one go.

That night Shorty decided to go over the pass to Silvertip before the big snows came. He asked Alamosa for his share of the money from the sale of our claims.

"It's all gone," Alamosa said. "I loaned it to Maureen to buy the store, and the supplies from Talboom."

Shorty's beard seemed to bristle like a porcupine. He tried Gaelic and choked on it before he finally roared, "Didn't I say he was playing a dirty game!"

"Would you have the Carmichaels starve?" Alamosa asked. "Or even us and Old Grunt? Now we all have food. In the spring Maureen will be grateful for what we have done, and then she will deal for the Lucky Chance."

IT STRUCK me, at last, that Alamosa did not give a hang for that claim. He was in love with Maureen. So was I. Together, we got Shorty cooled down. It proved easier than we had expected, for suddenly he turned away, with the flecks in his gray eyes little splinters of canniness.

That evening Shorty trimmed his beard and went courting. I went along, telling him that I had promised to play checkers with Crusheen, and that was just what I had to do. Mrs. Carmichael sat near the fireplace, with Mora in her lap. That Mora was a cute, wee elf for sure. Katie squirmed about, glaring at Shorty and me.

Crusheen was fourteen then. She had taken to wearing her hair up, and she was trying to lose some of her holy-terror ways. She and I played checkers, listening to Shorty's talk.

He began with a tale of two widows in his native village in Scotland. Because of sorrow, one hanged herself; the other wandered out upon the moor one night and froze. How much better it would have been, Shorty said, if they had married decent, hard working men.

Maureen agreed. Little Mora was big-eyed, and Katie stopped squirming. Crusheen was giggling, and I was grinning, until Mrs. Carmichael frowned us into good behavior. Then Shorty told of another widow who owned some fine cattle, which were stolen from her by spurned suitors. He added quickly that the number of scalawag Scots was, of course, amazingly small.

Crusheen and I were about to bust.

Katie asked Shorty to tell another story, this time just about cattle. He ploughed ahead, moving the scene to Ireland. There, he said, the fate of widows was something awful. At best, all they could do was to marry a second Irishman, which frequently made them no better off than before.

Right then Crusheen took four of my kings in one streak of jumping. I checked Shorty off the list as a dangerous threat.

Still, he had persistence. He kept right on trying that winter, and finally both Alamosa and I realized that he was actually in love with Maureen, too. Alamosa had the inside edge. That darned Crusheen kept getting in *my* way, and about all Shorty had was determination. Maureen used Old Grunt pretty handily that winter, keeping the other three of us in line. She taught old Grunt how to read and write, and he was the proudest old cuss you ever saw.

Four feet of snow dropped on us in November. From then on, until March, we saw one outsider, a man named Dave Hilliard. He came off the pass on skiis. We called them 'snowshoes' then. Hilliard was a balding, quiet man, obviously well educated. He said he was merely looking the country over. He bunked three nights with Old

Grunt, eating his meals at the store. We all liked Hilliard pretty well. Little Mora, especially, thought he was wonderful because of the stories he told her of things back east.

When he was ready to leave, standing on his snowshoes in front of the store, Maureen challenged him. "What railroad do you represent, Mr. Hilliard?"

She laid it out so flatly that even Alamosa was startled. Hilliard smiled. "Everyone out here is always talking of railroads," he said. He gave Mora a hug, and pushed away on his snowshoes.

Maureen gave us a searching look. "What other reason would have him looking at snow conditions?"

Mora died in February. The kids got wet wallowing around in the snow one day, but little Mora was the only one who caught the pneumonia. It took her away in three days. She might have been my baby sister, the way it struck me. Alamosa put his head on the store counter and cried like a woman. Shorty and Old Grunt went out and stood in the snow, staring helplessly at the mountains.

WE USED most of Carmichael's dynamite to get down through the frost, in the trees just above the river. When we were all there for the burying, Maureen shook her head. "No," she said. "Not here. This ground will be part of the town." She pointed. "Up there, on the hill."

I thought that grief had touched her sanity.

The snow where she had pointed was breast-deep. Alamosa and I hesitated, summoning gentle arguments. Shorty was holding the little box. The ice on his beard was a mixture of frozen tears and vapor from his breath. "You heard the lass!" he told us fiercely. He led the way up through the soft snow under the pines, and there we dug another hole.

That night we made two crude toboggans. The next morning we pulled them to the store.

"We're taking you and the kids downriver to Fawn Hollow," Alamosa told Maureen.

She shook her head. "It might have happened anywhere," she said. "I said to Carmichael the day we stopped here that I would never move again until my girls were grown. I say it now. My family has had enough of being dragged from place to place!"

We argued. She shook her head, standing there with the grief deep in her eyes. Finally we dropped the toboggan ropes and started back to our cabin.

"Take your sleighs with you!" she said.

Old Grunt spent the next two bitter days daubing the Carmichael living quarters. The logs were already as tightly sealed as moss and mud could make them, but Old Grunt said that killing air must have got through someplace to chill the little Mora. He quit only when his hands were so frostbitten that he nearly lost them.

When spring began to undermine the snow, we actually felt no burning interest in the Lucky Chance. Maureen had used it as bait to hold us, at first. Shorty and I knew that now. Alamosa had known it from the first.

Maureen called us all to the store one day. "I want a town here," she said. "It will be a town of honest purpose, for a town, or a man, is no good unless they stand for something." She looked at Alamosa.

We knew by now that if she loved any one of us, Alamosa was the man.

"Make Mormon Forge command Battle Pass!" Maureen said. "Instead of a miserable camp based on dreams of gold beneath the rocks, I want to see at least one place with real purpose behind it, and I want, if I live long enough, to see men with a real purpose behind them!"

Old Grunt's mouth was wide open.

Shorty squirmed. "But the Lucky Chance, Maureen—"

"It is wonderful on top," she said, "and it is heartbreak underneath." She looked at Alamosa again. He was sort of pale, but he grinned. "If you four

men are still here at this time next year, I will give the Lucky Chance to you."

She must have known she did not need that claim as bait any longer. But damn it, she wanted plenty. A town here. Sure, this was a good place to command the pass, if the railroad ever did come; and so were three or four other places up the river.

ALAMOSA was unusually quiet for several days. He recovered full speech when some suckers came along. He sold our claims once more. We established a townsite. Survey crews came through that summer. With them was Dave Hilliard, chief engineer of the Rio-Pacific. He said that Battle Pass was the route, and that was all he would say.

We laid the townsite out with wide streets and deep lots. Mormon Forge was an honest name. It came from the rotting, earth-filled cribbing near our cabin, where Mormons on their way west in the fifties had built their fires to refit tires on shrinking wagon wheels. We tore down some of the crumbling cabins, and built a few new ones on the lots. A constant stream of gold seekers passed through Mormon Forge that summer. We rigged up a blacksmith's shop, and repaired wagons, and we tried to hold settlers on our townsite; but even Alamosa's magic tongue could not keep people from the golden promise of a dozen camps springing up farther west.

When fall came, we had nothing but a townsite. Old Grunt had gone back to prospecting by then. Maureen told him to look for something besides gold, and he asked, "What other metal is there?"

That winter, a comparatively open one, Alamosa, Shorty and I worked most of the time over the pass in Silvertip, mucking in the silver mines. We knew we could not stand another winter cooped up together, close to Maureen, loving her as we did. She was safe enough in Mormon Forge, what with Old Grunt there to watch her.

The Rio-Pacific came up to Silvertip, and we heard that was the limit. Spring marched over the peaks again. Maureen gave us the Lucky Chance. "Let's not work it, boys," Shorty said. "She may be right about this ground."

"That's it!" Alamosa said. "If we take the frosting off it now, we may ruin the chances of a fat sale later."

Once more we spent a summer trying to interest people in our townsite. They went right on through, toward gold. It became increasingly difficult to stay, and watch the wagons pass.

At least, the travelers spent money in the store. Maureen had paid us back what she thought she owed us, and she made enough each summer to carry her and the girls through the snow-locked months. Again we went over the hill and worked at Silvertip, going back to Mormon Forge at Christmas and a few other times. Crusheen was a woman now. She blushed every time I caught her looking at me. Katie would be prettier when she grew up, but Crusheen was the one with the fire.

AT LAST the rails went up from Silvertip. In dead white winter we started cutting ties on our side of the pass. Old Grunt helped us, but he was really more interested now in a strange metal he had found than he was in railroads.

Each week that late winter we went to Mormon Forge. Maureen kept hammering us with that talk of towns and men having purpose. Alamosa was following her theme now. He was trying to prove something to her, not to us.

In the spring we got a piece of the work, clearing right-of-way. Alamosa won a pair of mules in a poker game at Silvertip. That helped a lot. The iron came down over raw fills and through stump-edged cuts.

It went through Mormon Forge without so much as a siding or switch. Hilliard was honest about it. He said that he had favored a place seven miles above Mormon Forge as a di-

vision point, but that he had been over ruled. Fawn Hollow was to be the division point.

We quit. The sounds of spike mauls fading into the west jeered at us. We sold the mules. We went to Silvertip on a flatcar. For two weeks Alamosa, Old Grunt and I staged a drunken brawl. Shorty, who did not drink, spent his time gambling, using his money wildly, winning like a fool; and he got no pleasure from any of it.

We were sullen and beaten when we went back to Mormon Forge. Maureen did not question our lapse, but her oldest daughter told me that I was a no-good drifter, and she mentioned the name of one of the survey men who had wanted to marry her that summer.

I told her to marry the whole Rio-Pacific engineering staff, for all of me; and then I threw in the president for good measure. Crusheen threw a can of milk at me, and then some canned tomatoes as I made a backward retreat up the road.

I told Alamosa we were all idiots, but that he was the worst of all for wanting to marry the head of the Carmichael family. Old Grunt tied into me right there. I yelled for Alamosa and Shorty to drag him off before he got hurt. They would not do anything, so I had to knock Old Grunt cold, but not before he broke my nose and three ribs.

We were all right after a few days to sort of level off; but it did not help any to see the trains going past Mormon Forge without so much as whistling.

"Wait until winter," Maureen said. "Sell the Lucky Chance, and wait."

We sold the claim for a figure that made Shorty curse. The men who bought it spent about twenty thousand dollars on a tunnel. They took out perhaps a thousand in gold—and that was it.

"Heartbreak underneath..." Alamosa murmured.

We did not just wait. We went above Mormon Forge to the other sites where yards and buildings could be built, where men and heavy equipment could be concentrated to strike at winter on the pass above. We located mining claims across those sites.

THERE WERE drifts six feet deep the next winter in Mormon Forge. The wind swept down the gulch like furiation. In the middle of the worst weather Crusheen and I decided to get married. Alamosa found a preacher on a stalled train, hauled him to the store on a toboggan, and Crusheen and I were married.

Alamosa said, "You had one eye on the canned goods all during the ceremony."

The Rio-Pacific found out that winter what we all knew: this side of Battle Pass could not be held open by crews striking from forty miles downriver. Legal representatives of the railroad came to see us. We held the conference in the store. Hilliard was there.

"The place we want is seven miles up the river, where you fellows own mining claims," Hilliard said.

"Rich ground," Alamosa said. "That pine flat will come awful high. Now here at Mormon Forge—"

"The railroad can have as much of the townsite as it needs, f r e e," Maureen said.

"Aye!" Shorty said.

That was not the way Alamosa and I had it figured, but we agreed. The free part was a big point with the lawyers. Honest to the last, Hilliard held out for the other site, but the lawyers had their way.

Mormon Forge was a busy little town that summer, and has been ever since. Old Grunt sold twenty claims to the New Jersey Corporation, cutting every one of us, including the girls, into the deal. He had been scratching at one of the largest zinc deposits in the West.

Old Grunt took Winthrop, the burro, on a trip around the world. That must have been a whizzer. Winthrop died in India. The burro was more used to a diet of cottonwood bark than rich fodder.

Right after Katie married a foreman

at the zinc mill, Maureen called us in for the last conference we ever had with her. Dave Hilliard was there in the store.

Maureen said, "Boys, I'm marrying Mr. Hilliard. We love each other."

She did not need, but she wanted, our approval. She was close to tears when she looked at Shorty and Alamosa. She looked at Alamosa the longest. I had been watching him when she made the statement, and for an instant his face had been like a bleak, hopeless slope of cold rock in winter.

A stranger would never have known, the way that handsome Irishman leaped up and hugged Maureen, and then shook Hilliard's hand. Shorty had given up some time before, but he still had trouble with his congratulations. The three of us grinned and tried to look pleased for a while, and then we went out.

We wound up at the old cabin, where we had not lived since we started selling lots. Alamosa stared at himself in a piece of broken mirror held to the logs with bent nails. "And him with practically no hair at all." he said, grinning. But it was not the old Brannigan grin.

"He's a good man—I suppose," Shorty said.

WE WERE there together for a while, and then we left. Alamosa closed the door carefully. We knew the three of us would never be together in that cabin again, or any other place.

Alamosa went away that night.

Crusheen told me that her mother cried about it. "But Alamosa was my father all over again," she said.

"Like the devil!" I felt pretty bad about Alamosa. "He did everything he could to settle down. I respect your mother, but—"

"You'd better!" Crusheen said. "Settling down isn't just staying in one place. It's having purpose—"

"I know! I've had that slammed at me for three years!"

"Now, you, you'll have some purpose—or I'll break your head!"

Shorty's grandsons now run the various enterprises that stemmed from the store Maureen gave Shorty when she left with Hilliard. It was just another little item during the Spanish-American War: Sgt. Lawrence R. Brannigan...dead of fever in Manila. His home was listed as Mormon Forge.

Of late, I have seen his face in the smoke that lies everlastingly on our town, and sometimes Shorty and Old Grunt are there too.

It is steel, not iron, that now comes down from Battle Pass, where the gleaming passenger trains and the rocking freights go over the Colorado Rockies. Mormon Forge is not a city, not even a large town, but it is here today, when a hundred other camps started in the same bright years are only rotting away.

Mormon Forge stands on spraddled legs, with its fists up, brawling, honest, commanding Battle Pass.

Its smoke is the smoke of worthwhile purpose that Maureen Carmichael talked about to four drifters. She was right in many things. I hope she was right about Alamosa Brannigan, because his face when I see it in the smoke of Mormon Forge, still holds the same expression that was on it for an instant that day in the store when she told us that she was marrying Hilliard.

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GRAVE - SENDING OF THE

The Sonora Kid had been able to hold up the Mountain stages for nearly a million dollars in a year!

DRAWING back on the reins, Jeff Randall slammed pressure against the brake, slowing the forward motion of the stage and grinding to a halt before the express office in the center of town. Men stared from the open doors and windows along the street. Others hurried along the walk, building into a crowd about the dusty coach. Jeff read the alarm that was written upon the upturned faces below, hearing a man's high voice call out from a store.

"What's up, Ben? Stage held up again?"

"Looks like!" another answered. "There's a stranger drivin'! No sign of old Tom!"

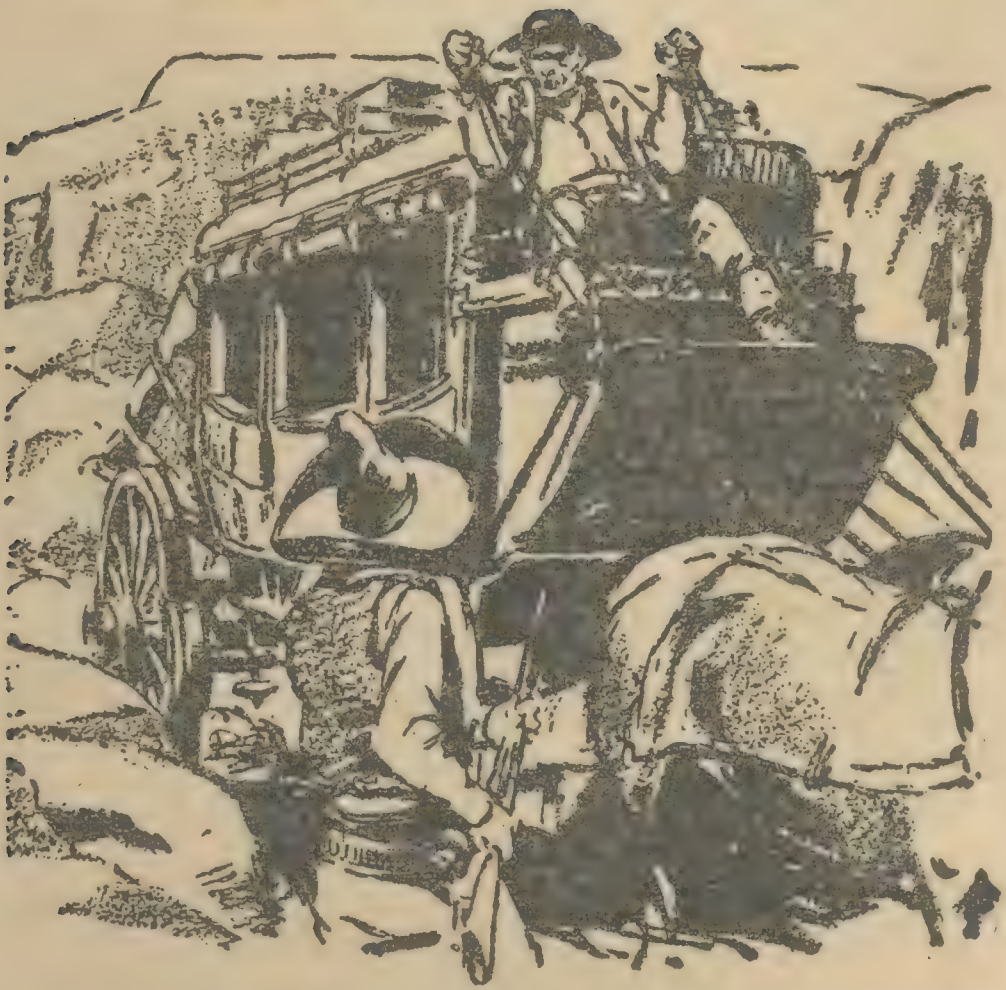
Jeff Randall looped the reins about the brake. He had stepped down to the wheel when he saw the sheriff push through the crowd. The man was paunchy, more stomach than chest, and there was deep suspicion in the narrow look of his eyes.

"Where's Tom Thurston?" His words were abrupt, plainly antagonistic.

Before Jeff could speak the door of the coach burst open and a tall, ungainly man stepped down, facing the sheriff angrily.

SONORA KID

by RAY TOWNSEND



A stranger rode the high seat of the stage this time. Because the driver and the gun-guard were no good with bullets in their bellies....

"I'll tell you where Tom Thurston is, Denton! He's dead! Dead as a mackerel and lying in the road ten miles back! And so is the guard! Both of them were murdered from ambush by the Sonora Kid!"

Jeff studied the sheriff's face closely as he stepped down from the wheel. He saw disbelief upon the weathered, frowning features, noticing that this same expression was obvious upon the other men who crowded about. Frank Tate, Sacramento City manager of Mountain Express, continued to berate the lawman, shaking his long, bony hand before the sheriff's nose.

"This would not have happened, Sheriff Denton, if you had met us at the county line with the escort you promised! If it hadn't been for Mr.

Randall here, your damned incompetence would have cost the company ten thousand in gold! As it is, you can count the deaths of the driver and guard on your own head! On yours and the Sonora Kid's!"

"Just a minute, Tate!" The sheriff's glance narrowed. "How do you know it was the Sonora Kid? The Kid might hold up your stages and take your gold, but he's never killed a man yet!"

Jeff felt his irritation rise. In the past six weeks he had passed through half a dozen counties and had dealt with as many sheriffs. He knew that Mountain Express was not exactly loved along the Lode. But this indifference to the many depredations of the Sonora Kid was getting to be too general a thing to be amusing.

"I got a good look at your Sonora Kid, sheriff." Jeff kept his voice low. "Got in a couple of shots, too, but we were moving too fast to see if they did any good."

Sheriff Denton looked at Jeff suspiciously. "This hombre another Company flatfoot, Tate?" he demanded. "If he is, I'd better set him straight right now that my office don't draw its pay from Mountain Express—and don't take its orders, neither!"

"I'll have your badge for this, Denton!" Tate roared. "This 'hombre', as you call him, happens to be Mr. Jeff Randall, vice-president of Mountain! He's come up from the San Francisco office to see why the local authorities seem to think this Sonora Kid is some kind of Robin Hood instead of the outlaw and killer he really is!"

"Vice-president, eh?" There was amusement in the man's heavy face as he looked more closely at Jeff. "So the Sonora Kid's pulling them out of the front office these days! Figure to take the Kid with pencil and paper, Randall? Or you just going to shake a little salt on his tail?"

Laughter filtered through the crowd at this. Jeff Randall had handled too many small town lawmen to let the man get under his skin. He was a lean, hip-lank man, Randall, and had worked his way up through ten years and every job the Company had to offer.

He did not smile, but said softly, "If salt is what it takes, sheriff, I reckon I'll get around to it sooner or later. From the looks of things today a salt shaker might be more effective than depending on the law. Old Tom Thurston is pretty dead."

JEFF MOVED off through the crowd at this, leaving Tate to deal with the abruptly frowning sheriff. He saw from the mood of the men about him that Tom Thurston had been highly regarded in spite of the fact that he took his pay from Mountain Express. Yet it was these very men, and others like them along the Lode, that had made it possible for the Sonora Kid to continue his operations undetected for nearly a year.

Jeff Randall felt no sympathy for men like these. He had known Tom Thurston himself for nearly ten years —had counted him one of his oldest friends. Tom had known, as did Jeff, that Mountain Express was hated because of its monopoly along the Lode, its high rates on freight and passenger service.

Yet the very fact that the Sonora Kid had been able to hold up Company stages to the tune of nearly a million dollars in one single year had more than anything to do with the rising rates that were charged. These men, townsmen, miners, even the lawmen along the Lode, were but victimizing themselves by sitting back and actually applauding the lawless activities of the Sonora Kid.

If Mountain Express had had the full cooperation of all law-abiding men, Jeff knew that the Sonora Kid long ago would have met his doom. If blame were to be put, Tom Thurston's death, and that of the guard as well, rested today as much upon the heads of these negligent men as upon the Sonora Kid himself.

"Jeff! Jeff Randall!" The voice jerked him out of his brooding thoughts, turning him upon the walk in front of the Company office.

The girl who came toward him now was golden haired and smiling, the deep blue of her eyes sparkling with excitement. She was wearing a heavy riding skirt and white blouse and carried several packages in her arms.

"Jeff!" Her voice was warm as she shifted the bundles and held out her hand to his. "Why, Jeff Randall, I'll bet you don't even remember who I am!"

Embarrassment crowded up in Jeff. He was fumbling for words when a wiry little man of fifty stepped out of the store adjoining the company office and looked his way.

Amos Fairweather! The years telescoped suddenly and wonder pushed up in Jeff's mind.

"Ellen," he said. There was too much amazement in him to smile. This girl, this woman grown, Ellen Fairweather? He remembered a knobby-kneed brat of twelve, wearing pigtails and cussing with the best of the men along the Mountain in '52. Amos Fairweather's daughter, who had lived with her father on the claim adjoining Jeff's and Dave's.

"Yes, Ellen Fairweather! But you didn't know till you saw Dad!" She was teasing him now, a forthright girl, though without any trace of the maliciousness he remembered her to have as a child. She had been a regular hellion, this one, a tease and a torment to her father and every miner along the river as well.

"Amos, you old rapscallion!" Jeff's smile came up as the older man approached. "How the hades you been? I thought the two of you went east years ago! Why didn't you let me know?"

"Let you know?" Ellen's laugh again struck its note of wonder in Jeff. "Let you know what, Mister Jeff Randall? Dad and I were in San Francisco last year and we couldn't even get past the front office to see you! You were busy, they said! Are you always too busy to see old friends?"

Jeff flushed, feeling suddenly guilty before the girl. He noticed that Amos had hardly spoken; that the man had stopped short, and without offering his hand. Ellen continued as though she had not noticed her father's reluctance.

In quick, bright words she told him of the ranch they had; of the cattle, wheatlands and vineyards that covered the footslopes and valley floor above the Yuba's banks. But as she talked a shadow welled up in Jeff Randall's mind; a shadow out of the past; a man's shadow; a man named Dave.

Jeff had not thought of Dave for a year or more now. Through all the years he had worked for Mountain, ever since those dark days when he had left his claim at Whitman's Flat, he had deliberately forced all thought of the man from his mind.

Yet, now, in meeting these two people who themselves had been involved in those times, he had a moment's quick glimpse of Dave's laughing and handsome face. The memories that came with it were not pleasant. He returned to the moment in hand as Amos Fairweather spoke.

"Well, girl! We can't stand here jawin' all day! Randall's got business, likely, and we got to get back to the ranch!"

Jeff frowned inwardly at the old-timer's use of his surname. They had been friends, he and Amos. He sensed too that there was now a forced gayety beneath the girl's smile.

"Now, don't you forget, Jeff!" she was saying. "First thing tomorrow morning! I've got a mare I'd like you to see and there's plenty of saddle stock! I'll show you a ranch that will make you think you went into the wrong business, young man!"

He stood watching them go, a lone and lank figure upon the walk, feeling yet that same sense of wonder at Ellen's grown beauty, but knowing a new and inexplicable sense of unrest that Fairweather's behavior and the memories of Dave had brought.

"OF COURSE, you have more information than I do, Randall—" Frank Tate paced the small office, his long-fingered hands clasping

and unclasping behind his back. "—but one thing is certain! We've got to get this Sonora Kid and get him ourselves! Men like Denton don't give a hang whether Mountain goes broke or not! If the Kid had stopped us today I'd have been forced to discontinue the Marysville run! With the insurance companies turning us down, we can't afford another loss!"

Feet propped up on the desk, Jeff lolled back in the swivel chair. He struck a light, dragging in on the long Havana he held in his mouth. Exhaling, he glanced at the Marysville agent, a silky haired and thin faced young man by the name of Evans who was sitting in a straight-backed chair beyond the desk.

"Tate's right, Evans," he said easily. "This shipment of specie we brought in today wasn't scheduled to arrive until next week. Nobody on this end knew it was coming. And yet the Sonora Kid was waiting to jump this particular stage. If I hadn't decided to come along at the last minute, you'd be out of a job right now."

"But I don't understand, Mr. Randall." The young man's expression was serious. "How did the Sonora Kid know—how does he always know which stage is carrying bullion or specie? I don't know that myself!"

"That's exactly what I'd like to know, Evans. That's why Tate and I are making this trip. Like Frank said, we can't expect much help from the local authorities. They seem to think that holding up Mountain stages is all in the nature of sport." He came to his feet, moving toward the door.

Evans got up, frowning as he spoke. "Maybe things will be a little different now, Mr. Randall. Tom Thurston was pretty well liked in these parts. I'd suggest you talk to the sheriff again when he comes back with old Tom's body."

Jeff nodded from the door. "I'll do that. Right now I've got some business at the telegraph office. Tate will ask you some questions. Give him what help you can."

Jeff did not get out to the Fairweather place until late the next afternoon. He had been pleasantly surprised to find that Sheriff Denton had raised a posse and had sent them on the trail of the Sonora Kid.

"Ain't lost no love for your outfit," the man said the evening before. "And ain't losin' none now. But bushwhackin' is different. If the Kid's turned killer, he'll find that Yuba County's a right smart place to be from!"

He had questioned Jeff carefully concerning the appearance of the road agent who had killed Tom Thurston, shaking his head as though he had hoped to find something here that would indicate that the Sonora Kid was not at fault.

"Yep. Sounds like him, all right. Black pants, shirt, hat, and wearin' a black silk scarf over most of his face. Well, we'll do what we can, Randall, but this is a big country. He could be standin' in front of a bar in Sacramento City right now, for all we know."

When Jeff first saw the long, rambling ranch house on its rise above the river, he drew up in sheer surprise. He had passed a marker four or five miles back that had read Yuba-Loma Ranch. Cattle grazed thickly along the wide, lush bottoms. Hundreds of acres of wheat waved gently across the valley floor. Nearer the slopes the first tender leaves of the vineyards showed green against the brown earth.

This was no modest farm, nor a ranch of the proportions he had expected. The Yuba-Loma Ranch was a vast estate. The house itself was of white-washed adobe, roofed with red tiles. Here was represented by far more wealth than he had been prepared to find, and for a moment he thought he must have taken a wrong turning, that this could not possibly be the Fairweather place.

Yet his directions had been explicit. And now, as he sauntered along the river road, lifting toward the house, his sense of wonder was overcome by his admiration of the verdant beauty of this foothill-valley estate. Through

all the years he had worked for Mountain, Jeff Randall had dreamed of one day owning just such a ranch. As the country had settled he had seen from time to time certain farms and ranches along the lower Sierra slopes that had set up a yearning within him for the ownership of such land. But this—this was even beyond his own dreams.

How had Amos Fairweather come to own such a place? Even allowing for what the man had taken with rocker and sluice in the old days on the Mountain River, this—no, this was too much. But this thought dropped from mind when he saw Ellen ride out to meet him. She was laughing and called out ahead, turning as she came out and challenging him to a race down across the slope toward the river.

Jeff did not see Amos until dinner that night. The meal, served in the open patio in the early evening, was a quiet affair, with a growing sense of strain becoming increasingly apparent to Jeff. Ellen, wearing a gay Spanish skirt and blouse, seemed to laugh too easily. Amos ate his food in silence.

Though Jeff had avoided the subject till now, it came to him that all three of them had the same thing in mind. He eased back finally, looking directly at Ellen.

"What about Dave?" he said. "Either of you hear anything from Dave these days?"

He saw the glance that exchanged itself between them.

"Randall—" Amos Fairweather had once been a wry humorous little man. Now he was serious, his brows drawn together in a frown that seemed to hold more than a little suspicion. "A lot of water's flowed under the bridge since '52."

"Please, Dad!" Ellen said anxiously.

Amos turned on his daughter, anger rising visibly in his face.

"See here, girl! It was your idee, invitin' him out to the place like this! And now I'll have my say!" His gaze came back to Jeff. "Randall, we got a new life here, and headaches of our own to tend to! You got your business and it ain't got nothin' to do with us! So I'm tellin' you flat out that you'd better give the Yuba-Loma a wide berth after this, understand?"

With this, Amos came to his feet, bootheels clacking off over the tile to the house beyond. Ellen rounded the table as Jeff slowly rose.

"Please, Jeff! Don't pay any attention to Dad! He—he's worried these days. There are problems.... Running a ranch this size is not as easy as it looks."

Jeff knew that she was merely searching for words. She was lovely, Ellen Fairweather, her features and the smooth bare flesh of her shoulders above the Spanish blouse, softly outlined in the growing dusk and the lamplight from the house. Jeff Randall felt a stir of tenderness, almost of longing, for this girl he had known as an awkward child.

But he said, "Dave's come back. You've seen Dave, haven't you, Ellen?"

"No! Oh, no, Jeff!" Her answer was breathless and too abrupt. "Oh, please, Jeff! I shouldn't have asked you out! Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken to you at all! But—"

"But what, Ellen?"

"Oh, Jeff—Jeff!" She was in his arms then, her own arms about him, holding him close. Surprise and a sudden realization of his own desires came up in Jeff.

"Ellen." He turned her face up and would have kissed her then, but she broke away.

"Dad was right!" she sobbed. "You must go away! Go away and, please, don't ever come here again!" She turned then and ran through the shadows to the house.

JEFF RANDALL stopped by the telegraph office next morning. He unfolded the square of paper the visored operator handed him. The body of the message said, *Placerville shipment received as planned. No robbery attempted enroute.* It was signed by the shipping clerk, Simpson, temporarily in charge of the Sacramento office.

Jeff smiled grimly as he folded the

sheet, recrossing the street and moving in brisk strides toward the Marysville office of Mountain Express. Inside he waited until Evans had finished speaking with a passenger. When the man went out, stepping into the stage that stood in the street, Jeff asked his question.

"Why, he rode out first thing this morning, Mr. Randall." The young agent was evidently anxious to please this vice-president of the company for which he worked. "I had old Carter fix him up with a mount. He said to tell you he'd be back around noon."

As Jeff went around to the stables he felt a greater sense of satisfaction than he had at any time in the past six weeks. For several months now he had realized that the Sonora Kid must be getting information from someone within the Company. When he had left San Francisco his boss and president of the company, T. L. McGovern, had shaken his grizzled head, still dubious of Jeff Randall's plan.

"I tell you there's less than half a dozen men who know when and where these shipments of bullion and specie are to be made! And every one of these men has been with us right from the start!" The old man had clapped his hand on the desk, eyes sparking at Jeff as he spoke.

"No sir, Randall," he'd said, "if there's a leak in my company, you've got to prove it to me!"

But the older man had been glad to see him go, nevertheless. Through the years they had worked together, a solid friendship had sprung up between Jeff Randall and his boss. Too, there was Anne McGovern, T. L's daughter. Several times Jeff had been on the verge of asking Anne to marry him. But during this past year, as the Company's losses had mounted through the depredations of the Sonora Kid, Jeff had put the thought aside, realizing that unless the Kid was stopped, Mountain Express would fall into bankruptcy.

It was almost unbelievable that a single outlaw could bring to its knees an organization the size of Mountain. Serving all of northern and central California, the Company had for more than five years dominated the entire transport facilities of the area. Its enemies were many, Jeff well knew. But at last, with the news he had received by telegraph this morning, Jeff was at last on his way at localizing the exact source he sought.

In this past six weeks he had checked and eliminated division managers, agents, shipping clerks and even drivers and guards. By narrowing the numbers of those advised of date and route of shipment, he had at last focussed his attention upon two or three different men.

Frank Tate, manager of the Sacramento City division, was the final and last of these. If the law enforcement agencies could not be depended upon to bring in the Sonora Kid, Jeff Randall hoped at least to render the outlaw impotent by cutting off his information at the source.

Tate had been with the Company as long as Jeff himself. Though the man's record was impeccable, Jeff knew that Frank Tate had expected to get the promotion that T. L. had granted to him. Also, Tate had paid court to T. L's daughter, Anne during the years Jeff had been on the road as general troubleshooter for Mountain. Though it had been none of his doing, Anne had turned from the man when Jeff had moved to the City and taken over his new and better paid job.

There was no personal animosity in Jeff Randall. He felt neither one way nor the other where Tate was concerned. Nor did he think Frank was so childish as to ruin the Company out of resentment at losing a single promotion. But there were other goals to aim at besides merely ruining the Company. Jeff had pondered these, had probed Tate's chances of success and had insisted that the man accompany him on this trip solely in order to gain his final proof. Now that proof seemed to be nearing its final culmination.

IT WAS late afternoon when Jeff rode back into town after covering a broad sweep of the rising country beyond. He had no actual hope of discovering where Frank Tate had ridden when he had left Marysville that morning, nor had he seen any sign of the man.

He drew rein abruptly as he turned into the head of the main street, narrowly avoiding a racing team. He caught sight of the girl's streaming blonde hair at the same moment that Ellen Fairweather called out his name. The rig slowed and drew to a halt as he came alongside.

A darkly dressed elderly man with sidewhiskers and an impatient air sat beside Ellen upon the seat. The girl's nervous excitement was plain on her face as she spoke to Jeff.

"It's Dad, Jeff! He—he's had an accident! Dr. Jensen and I— Oh, Jeff! Please come!"

The accident, as Jeff had begun to suspect, turned out to be in the shape of a forty-five bullet that had lodged to one side of Amos Fairweather's lung. The small wiry man wore a grin that Jeff remembered from the days on the Mountain River, as he lounged against pillows upon his bed at the ranch.

Though the doctor waved both Ellen and Jeff out of the room, Amos said dryly, "It's what a man gets for tryin' to bluff his hand. Ellen will tell ye about it, boy. But don't be too hard on her. She's only a lass, and didn't have no choice in the thing."

It was dark when Jeff followed the girl outside. The warm valley air flowed up the rise, rich with the smell of the river and growing things. Jeff looked down at the girl before him, seeing the pale outlines of her face in the gloom.

"You know, don't you, Jeff? You know who it was?" she said.

"Yes." There seemed to be an enormous weight on Jeff's shoulders abruptly. The way she spoke, combined with what had passed the evening before, told Jeff more clearly than words who it had been—who had shot Amos.

"Dave." He said the word softly, though an ache seemed to rise and settle within his chest. "It was my brother Dave, wasn't it, Ellen? Dave's come back. He's here."

There was no question in his voice, nor was he surprised to hear a man's step upon the tiles; to recognize the soft laughter of the voice as he turned.

"Yes! Dave's back, Jeff! Dave Randall, your brother—remember?" The man was hardly more than a face in the shadows, his smile showing whitely in the dusk.

The years rolled over Jeff Randall then. Dave. Young Dave. His kid brother. Dave, who had gone bad—who had been bad from the start, in spite of his laughing and carefree ways.

He had killed two men on the Mountain in '52, Dave Randall. Jeff had helped him to escape the vigilante mob, and Dave had stolen Jeff's stake for his pains. That was the last time Jeff had seen his brother.

Now, seeing the outlines of his brother's form in the darkness, the full cycle turned in Jeff's mind. This ranch, the Yuba-Loma, the cattle, grain, vineyards. Yes, such a place could be bought with far less than the Sonora Kid had stolen in specie and bullion in this past year. Jeff started to speak, but Dave's words rushed in.

"Don't move, Jeff! Don't try anything funny! This gun is just liable to go off!" He laughed then and said, "Ellen! Come over here!"

The girl paused, looking at Jeff with wide eyes. She went finally, though, nor did she seem afraid.

"Yes, I've come back, Jeff!" Dave Randall said. He put his arm deliberately about the girl. "I've been around for quite a while, in fact! But I don't see where that's any business of yours! Nice place I've got here, don't you think? Oh yes—Ellen and I are going to be married, too! I know you want to congratulate us, Jeff!"

Words came hard to Jeff. "So

you've taken to shooting your friends now, Dave?"

Dave's laughter cut off. "You're not the law, Jeff! That was an accident! Ask Ellen! She'll tell you!"

The girl gasped, as though he had gripped her arm. "Yes," she murmured. "Yes, that's right, Jeff. It was only an accident. Dad was cleaning his gun."

For a single second Jeff thought of accusing his brother openly, of asking him why he had become the Sonora Kid. But he knew there was only uselessness in the thought. Amos had been right. There was too much water gone under the bridge. He turned and moved to his mount and rode off, hearing Dave's laughter rise up in the night.

JEFF RANDALL knew he couldn't quit, that he had to see the thing through to the end. He laid his trap carefully that next day, watching Frank Tate's face as he planted his information and seeing the man ride out of town later when he thought Jeff to be asleep in his room.

After all, perhaps it wasn't Dave. Jeff knew he had only his own dark feeling of premonition to go on. He hoped he was wrong, and yet....

"We're getting in twenty thousand in gold bullion at midnight tonight," he'd told Tate. "It's coming down from the Mexican Mine for shipment to Sacramento. No one knows this but you and me and Sampson, of the Mexican. Not even Evans is in on the deal. Sampson will drive it down himself and the three of us will unload it and put it into the safe. We'll figure a good time to ship it out later."

Now, as the evening crowds thinned off the streets, Jeff left the hotel, moving toward the express office. He met Sheriff Denton and two deputies on the way and turned into the office as the clock on the rear wall struck eleven.

Frank Tate, who had been talking to young Evans across the desk, looked around. His swarthy, thin features showed surprise as he saw who was with Jeff. He slowly unfolded himself from the chair.

"Say, it's getting pretty late, Randall." His eyes circled the man. "Don't you think—"

"All right, Sheriff—" Jeff cut into Tate's words. "You can leave him here, or take him down and lock him up. We'll know in about an hour if we've got the right man!"

"What is this, Randall?" Alarm sprang to Tate's face. "Lock who up? I demand—"

"You demand nothing, Tate!" Jeff turned on the man. "I've been figuring your play for quite a while now! You knew that if the Sonora Kid wasn't stopped, old T. L. would either have to declare bankruptcy, or sell his majority holdings in the Company! You'd like to get your hands on those holdings, wouldn't you, Frank?"

Anger blazed in the man's dark eyes. Jeff knew he was right when the man made no protest of not understanding.

"Where would I get money to buy out T. L.?" Tate demanded.

Jeff grinned. "Let's see. We've lost close to a million this last year. And if you're smart as I think you are, you've been getting at least fifty percent of that for passing the word! Yes—yes, I think you could just about do it—if T. L. ever got that hard up, Tate. But he won't, understand? Not after tonight, he won't! Better lock him up, Denton! If I know a thing, we've got our man!"

The decoy man drove his team along the deserted street and stopped the wagon in front of the express office at five after twelve. Jeff Randall and Tom Evans stepped out to help him unload. The canvas sacks, laden with rocks, were heavy as they carried them beside the safe.

It was ten minutes after twelve when Jeff heard the slow, muffled steps of horses approaching along the shadowed street. He jerked his head at Evans and the driver and the two went inside. He stood quietly waiting as a single horseman came forward, stop-

ping in the outthrown light of the office.

"Hello, Dave." The last ounce of hope died in Jeff.

Dave Randall was dressed in black from head to toe, though he wore no kerchief about his face. He smiled, nodding toward the lighted window.

"Hello, Jeff. Tate inside?"

"No, Dave." Jeff saw his brother's smile instantly disappear at this. There was sickening pain within him now, but he said, "It's a trap, Dave. I figured Tate's play. I figured yours too, last night."

Dave Randall cursed, looking quickly about him.

"Don't try it, Dave." Jeff's voice was still soft. "There's twenty men in the dark out there. They'll cut you down before you get two feet!"

Dave's glance came back slowly. Slowly he smiled.

"You were always a good one to run a bluff, Jeff."

Jeff Randall shook his head. "How was it with Amos? And Ellen? How did you convince them to string along?"

Dave laughed now. "Big money talks, old boy! Amos couldn't resist it any more than any man could! Nearly half a million, Jeff! And there'll be more!"

Again Jeff shook his head. "Not after tonight. What about Ellen?"

Dave cursed. His draw was lightning-quick, the gun appearing instantly within his hand.

"There'll be more! Plenty more—if I have to put you south to get it!"

This was true sickness. Jeff knew in this moment that his own brother would kill him for money.

He said, "They're out there, Dave. I'm not bluffing."

"You, there!" Denton's voice roared from the darkness beyond. "Drop that gun! I've got twenty deputies along this street!"

Jeff saw his brother's face go pale, realizing that the man had actually thought he was bluffing. There was compassion now in Jeff, a greater sorrow than he had ever known.

"Hold your fire!" Dave snarled the words. "Step up here, Jeff! We're going out of here together! If I hear a gun so much as cock, I'll blast your guts all over this street!"

As Jeff stood frozen upon the walk, a second rider moved in from the darker run of the street beyond. Jeff remembered he had heard the sounds of two horses together in the moment before Dave had appeared.

"No, Dave!" It was Ellen's voice and the sound of it ran chills up Jeff's spine as he stood with out motion. "This is the end! You got Dad into this against his will, and I've had to keep silent all along! But you're not going to kill Jeff! Not if I have to—"

"Look out, Ellen!" Jeff yelled the words as Dave cursed and turned, snapping a shot directly toward Ellen.

The girl screamed, her gun going off into the air. Jeff was coming up with his own weapon as she fell from the saddle and Denton's voice exploded from the darkness beyond.

But Jeff had no chance to fire, nor did Dave Randall have time to turn back. A solid salvo of gunfire erupted from building-fronts and alleyways along the street.

Dave Randall came upright in the saddle, a choking scream dying unborn in his throat. He jerked back and was slammed forward. The Sonora Kid was dead before he hit earth.

HALF AN hour later Jeff stood anxiously before a hotel room door. He nodded at the sheriff, not hearing the man's words, and turned as the doctor came out of the room.

"Cleanly through the shoulder," he said. "She needs rest, but I guess you can see her a while."

Jeff knelt by the bed, taking her hand and drinking in the beauty of Ellen's pale face with his eyes. Wincingly she smiled.

"Now we're both shot up," she said. "Now we'll have a heck of a time trying to run that ranch." She frowned

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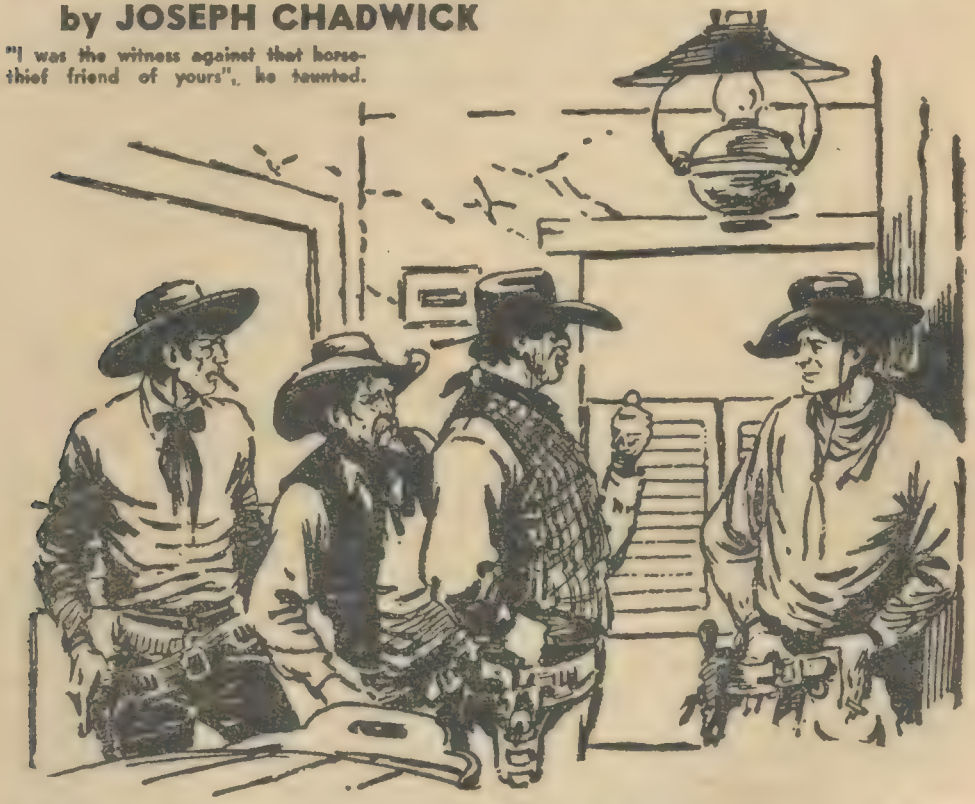
LONG RANGE FOR A SHORT GUN

by JOSEPH CHADWICK



"I was the witness against that horse-thief friend of yours", he taunted.

There'd never been anything but kangaroo courts in the Neutral Strip—Garrett would find only bushwhack justice here....

ONE MORNING during the summer of '86, a great New York newspaper published an article entitled "No Man's Land." It said, in part, *This vast land, larger than some Eastern states, is a refuge for outlaws and other riffraff. There is no law in No Man's Land!*

That same morning in the Neutral Strip—a wild country lying north of the Texas Panhandle and forgotten when the Congress of the United States fixed the boundaries of the western territories—a rider on a done-in horse approached the G-bar cow camp on Ha'f Moon Creek.

Jim Garrett, boss of the cow outfit, was saddling a horse when the rider came into sight over a prairie swell a half mile to the east. Garrett's one hired hand, an oldtimer named Hank Baugher, said, "Sure looks like somebody's in one devil of a hurry."

Garrett didn't say anything. He was a miser with words, never talking when, as now, a nod or a shake of the head would serve as well. He finished saddling his horse, a big dun gelding, and then took out makings as he turned again to look at the oncoming rider. Garrett was tall, lanky; he had an angular and weathered face, already at thirty, and whatever capacity for humor he might possess was buried be-

neath the grim look that the hard life of a two-bit rancher stamped upon a man.

The rider was close now, and Garrett, not liking to see a horse abused, began to frown. The fellow was riding a pinto pony, and the animal had been pushed so hard it was now stumbling. It was lathered and blowing. The rider was a kid of about sixteen, a stranger to Jim Garrett; a poorly dressed and rather simple looking kid. He jerked the pinto to a stop, dropped from a disreputable saddle, came toward Garrett with an idiotic grin on his homely face. He took a folded sheet of notepaper from the pocket of his bib-overalls, held it out to Garrett without saying a word.

Garrett lighted his cigarette, then took the paper. He unfolded it, saw that there were but a few hastily written words. He read, *"The vigilantes are going to hang George Mowery at Denton."* The note was signed, *"A Friend."*

Garrett's face showed his surprise, his alarm. He looked up at the messenger, said sourly, "What's this, a joke?"

The youth grinned some more, opened his mouth wide. Garrett knew then that he wasn't to have an answer. Here was an unfortunate; deformed of tongue and palate, the boy couldn't talk. Hank asked, "What's the trouble, Jim," and Garrett handed him the note. The frown on Garrett's face had deepened into a scowl. Suddenly he muttered an oath, flung down his cigarette, strode to his horse. Hank came over to him as he mounted, saying, "Loco, this. Why would those blamed vigilantes want to hang somebody like George?"

"I aim to find out."

"Get a whiff of this," Hank said, and handed back the note.

Garrett held the paper to his nose. "Perfume," he said, looking puzzled.

Hank nodded, rubbed his bristly chin. "Woman sent it," he said. "Perfume and fancy writing. Now, that's odd. Would George be mixed up with a woman?"

Garrett said again, "I aim to find out."

Pocketing the note, he turned the dun about and headed east. He lifted the horse to a fast run, pushing it as hard as the kid had pushed his scrawny pinto.

IF A MAN looked upon one of the Strip's scattered towns, he saw them all. Denton, like any of the others, was a naked eyesore on the prairie. Its first citizens had lived and done business in houses built of sod. Some of the sod huts still remained, but Denton had progressed to a degree and now it boasted houses and buildings of rough, unpainted plank.

But for a larger number of saddle horses and rigs along its single street, the town appeared no different than usual when Jim Garrett rode in on his blowing dun. But then he saw a man with a shotgun standing guard on the porch of the Star Saloon & Dancehall, and knew that extraordinary business was being dealt with—and that the note he had received wasn't any false alarm.

Garrett left his horse groundhitched, stepped onto the Star's porch with the guard, Beckworth the liveryman, eyeing him uncertainly. Garrett said, "Never mind," and the guard shrugged. Pushing through the swing doors, Garrett paused just inside to let his eyes become accustomed to the gloom of the place after the bright sunlight. A voice was saying into a tomblike silence, "Then I sentence you, George Mowery, to be hanged by the neck until you are dead!"

Two dozen men were there, gathered at the rear of the long room, in the space ordinarily serving as a dancefloor. The man who had passed sentence sat at a table on the musicians' platform, a gaunt faced man of nearly seventy. He had a snow-white mustache and goatee. He was saying, as

Garrett strode forward, "And may God have mercy on your soul."

This old man was Ira Harmon, and, since he claimed to be a retired lawyer, he was known in the Strip as Judge Harmon. That he was serving here as a judge was no surprise to Jim Garrett. The vigilantes were making a show of following legal procedure; any victim of their brand of law enforcement was given what passed for a trial.

The prisoner stood before the "bench," a husky, red-haired man of about twenty-five. He looked dazed, bewildered. They had his hands shackled. The man who stood nearest George Mowery put a hand on the prisoner's shoulder, and said harshly, "All right, Mowery, come along."

Garrett was pushing through the silent crowd. He said, "Hold on a minute." The crowd came alive, some of the men starting to mutter. Garrett faced the old man seated at the table. "What's all this?" he demanded. "What's Mowery done?"

"He's been found guilty of horse-stealing, Mr. Garrett," said Judge Harmon. "Sentence has been passed and—"

"George Mowery a horse thief? That's crazy!"

"You're questioning the findings of this court, sir?"

Garrett stared at the old man. He turned and looked at the burly man who held Mowery by the shoulder. Russ Malone, leader of the vigilantes, so-called sheriff of Denton. He swept the crowd with a scowling look. Townsmen and ranchers and squatters. "Court?" he said, savagely. "Since when have there been anything but kangaroo courts in No Man's Land? Like this one. If you hang George Mowery, it'll be murder!"

Judge Harmon pounded his gavel. "Garrett, I warn you—"

Garrett turned to him, rocky of face. "If there's any reason for you being called a judge," he said, "you know this whole business is illegal. I'm giving you my word for it—if there's a horse thief in this room, it's not George Mowery. I know the man."

He sensed somebody closing in on him from behind, and whirled. He saw Russ Malone lifting his six-shooter like a club, and was too taken by surprise to duck. The blow was partially cushioned by his hat, but still it had force enough to stun him. Garrett made a futile grab for his own gun as his knees buckled. Blurrily, he saw Malone launching a second blow. He saw too that George Mowery had roused from his daze, and was clumsily trying to strike Malone down with the chain shackling his arms. Russ Malone's blow was first to land. Garrett's brain exploded with pain. He sprawled out on the floor.

And knew no more.

GARRETT came to in a backroom where barrels of whiskey and kegs of beer were stored. Somebody had carried or dragged him there, dumped him on the floor face down. He rolled over and sat up, held his aching head in his hands. A groan escaped him. Then, remembering, Garrett swore. He saw his hat nearby, reached for it. He reshaped it with care, thinking of Russ Malone who had gun-whipped him. A man quick to use violence, a man who struck without warning. Garrett rose with great effort, stood swaying. He made for the door when his giddiness passed, walked unsteadily into the barroom.

He had been unconscious quite some time. Only a half dozen men were here now, they lined up at the bar. The bartender poured a double shot of whiskey when he saw Garrett, and said, "Medicine. On the house." Garrett nodded his thanks, downed the drink. His head throbbed with pain, his vision was fuzzy. The men along the bar were silent, watching him uneasily.

"Mowery?" he asked.

There was a moment of silence,

then somebody said, "He's dead, Garrett. You'd better forget him."

"Dead or alive," Garrett said, "I don't forget a friend."

He started toward the door, but the man who had told him to forget George Mowery, stepped away from the bar and stopped him. It was Phil Langley who bossed an outfit called the Neutral Strip Development Company. But for the broad-brimmed hat such as most men wore in the range country, Langley dressed like a townsman—a big town man. He was in his middle thirties, a darkly handsome man with a friendly manner. It was said that he had been dead broke when he came to the Strip a year ago. But now, if such a thing was possible in a country without an administrative organization, the man was a political power. His firm was financed by men—mostly merchants in Denton and the Strip's other towns—who wanted the country settled. It strived to bring settlers into No Man's Land. It also endeavored to get Congress to acknowledge the existence of the Neutral Strip.

Langley said, "Mowery was given a fair trial, Garrett. I acted as his counsel. I'm no lawyer, but I did my best to defend him. There wasn't a chance. The evidence against him was damning."

"What evidence?"

"Stolen horses were found on his range."

"He admitted he'd brought them there?"

"No. He swore that he was innocent."

Garrett swore under his breath. "I knew George Mowery from the time he was a kid," he said. "He was no horse thief. It just wasn't in him. I'm telling you, Langley, an innocent man has been hanged."

Langley looked grave. He lighted a cigar, then said, "You could be right. But it's possible that Mowery was involved without actually doing any stealing. Like cattle rustling, horse stealing here in the Strip is on a large scale. The stock is taken out of the Strip, sold in Kansas, Texas, Colorado, or New Mexico. What I mean, Garrett, is that Mowery may have let the thieves use his ranch as a way station. The horses may have been held there until it was safe to move them out of the Strip. As I said, I defended him at the trial. But now I'm convinced that he was involved with the horse-stealing crowd."

"I'm not."

"The evidence—"

"Those horses could have been run onto Mowery's range without his knowledge," Garrett broke in. "I'd gamble on that."

Langley puffed on his cigar, frowning. "It was brought out at the trial that Mowery had been spending a lot of time and money at Sod Town," he said. "That's significant. Sod Town is an outlaw hang-out. Mowery had been drinking heavily, gambling for high stakes, and seeing a lot of a dancehall girl. Too, a witness testified that Mowery did know the stolen horses were on his range. The witness had grown suspicious of Mowery's spending so much money, and spied on him. He saw Mowery move those horses—about twenty head—from one part of his range to another. He reported it to the vigilantes."

"Who was this witness?"

"Garrett, let me give you some friendly advice. You—"

"Never mind the advice," said Garrett. "Who was the witness?"

Three men came in from the street just at that moment, and one of them said flatly, "I was the witness, Garrett. What about it?"

GARRETT swung around and saw that the speaker was a tough young cowpuncher named Red Tyson. He rode for the Seaton brothers' Slashed-S outfit. Jess and Cole Seaton were with Tyson now, flanking him, looking as though they would side him if there was trouble. Red Tyson had a sneer on his face as he said again,

"What about it?" He was brash, had a reputation as a scraper, and was always willing to give trouble a prod. "Talk up, Garrett," he taunted. "I was the witness against that horse-thief friend of yours. Now what about it?"

Garrett said, "You're the kind of witness a kangaroo court would let testify. What did it get you to lie George Mowery's neck into a noose?"

"Lie?" said Tyson, his face turning a dull red. "I won't take that." He came at Garrett. "Not from you. Not from any man."

He rushed at Garrett, a burly tough very sure of himself.

The double shot of whiskey had steadied Garrett. He stood his guard until the very last second, then, dodging the blow aimed at his face, he hit Tyson in the belly. Tyson stopped in his tracks, the air puffing out of him in a gusty grunt. His hands went to his hurt middle, and so he was wide open to the punch Garrett aimed at his head. The blow thudded loud in the quiet of the saloon, and Red Tyson was knocked off balance. He fell against a table, upsetting it with a crash. But he kept his feet, recovered enough to grab up a chair. He flung it, but Garrett was moving and it went past him to slam against the bar. Garrett went after his man, but Jess Seaton stepped between them and his brother Cole moved in behind Garrett.

Jess Seaton said, "That's enough. This'll end up with a shooting if you don't quit it now." He was a burly, swarthy man; like Garrett he was typical a cowman. "You're playing the fool, Garrett," he said sourly. "Red didn't lie about Mowery. He couldn't lie twenty stolen horses onto Mowery's range. Lay off him."

Behind Garrett, Cole Seaton said, "You've got a lot of men to lick, if you aim to lick every man who had a hand in hanging that horse thief, friend. You'd better keep that in mind."

Garrett moved aside so that he could watch all three. "There's something so rotten in this business that it smells," he said. "It smells like some kind of a frame-up. When I find out what Mowery was framed for and who framed him, there'll be hell to pay."

Red Tyson sneered, "Tough, ain't he? Real tough."

Jess Seaton said, "Red, shut up."

Cole Seaton said, "Garrett, don't make a mistake and go off half-cocked. You'll make more enemies than one man should have."

Garrett didn't reply to that.

He walked out.

Barton's general store was directly across the street. Garrett remembered the note that had brought him to Denton, and so crossed to the store. It was owned by Steve Barton, a young fellow from the East, and his sister Louise helped him run it. Louise, a tall and attractive girl with auburn hair, gold-flecked brown eyes, and a pleasant smile was alone when Garrett entered. She was in her early twenties, but she possessed a maturity that appealed to Garrett, who was bored by flighty girls, though he seldom in this predominately male country spent much time in any feminine company. Garrett had once been interested in Louise, but he had found a rival in Phil Langley. In fact, Langley from the start had been so attentive to the girl—without objection from her—that there seemed no hope for any other man where she was concerned.

HER SMILE now was friendly, nothing more. She said, "Hello, Jim. It's been a long time since you've been to town." She had been stacking canned peaches from a case onto a shelf, but now put the task aside. "I'm surprised that you came in today."

"Surprised? Why?"

"Well, you are so opposed to vigilante activity."

"George Mowery was my friend."

"Oh, yes," said Louise, coming from behind the counter to touch his arm. "I'm sorry about George. I'd forgotten that you and he had come from the

same part of Texas and were very close. I do wish that it could have been stopped. Hanging a man—" she shuddered—"for stealing horses seems unreasonable. A horrible punishment."

"Especially when the man wasn't guilty of horse stealing."

"Wasn't guilty, Jim?"

Garrett nodded. "I'll never believe George Mowery was a thief," he said. "Isn't your brother about? He's like me, opposed to vigilante law. I thought he might be able to tell me what was really behind this rotten business."

"He's on a trip to Kansas."

"Well, all right."

"He knows nothing about this trouble, Jim."

"I guess not," said Garrett. "And it'll be some job finding someone who does know about—and is willing to talk. Thanks for sending me the note, Louise."

She looked puzzled. "Note, Jim?" she said.

He took it from his pocket, handed it to her. Louise unfolded it, read it, looked up, and said, "I didn't write this. It could be a woman's handwriting, but it's not mine. As I said, I'd forgotten that you and George were close friends."

"Then, who...?"

He felt as bewildered as Louise looked. There were so few women in Denton, in all No Man's Land, that he had taken it for granted a moment ago that only Louise Barton could have written the note. He realized now that she wouldn't sign a note "A Friend." She was too honest and unafraid to hide behind anonymity. *Then, who?* he asked himself. It must be a woman who had been interested in George Mowery, and Phil Langley had mentioned it being brought out at the trial that George had been seeing a dancehall girl at Sod Town.

Louise was watching him closely. "What is it, Jim?" she asked.

"I've got it," he said. "The woman who sent me this note—" he took the paper back, returned it to his pocket "—can tell me why George was framed. I'm going to find her."

Louise didn't wholly understand, but there was suddenly a frightened look in her eyes. "Jim," she said, shuddering, "be careful. It's too easy for a man to make enemies in this country—enemies of men who have no regard at all for human life. Jim, it would be better to forget—"

Garrett shook his head. "Some things a man can't forget," he told her, and turned toward the door.

A minute later he was riding from Denton, toward Sod Town.

IT WAS growing dark when Garrett forded Coon Creek and saw the lights of Sod Town in the distance. Even grubbier than Denton, this town consisted of one store, a restaurant, four saloons, a livery stable, and a few houses. It had never developed a vigilante movement, for it catered to the outlaw crowd.

Garrett left his horse at an already crowded hitch-rack in front of a saloon, then went to the restaurant for supper. After the meal, he made a tour of the saloons and two of the four kept percentage girls as an added attraction. Garrett looked over the painted women in O'Leary's Palace, and decided that none of them was the sort that would have interested George Mowery for long. He stayed longer in the Alhambra, a bigger and busier place, and furtively studied the half dozen women there while he had a drink at the bar.

She was young, dark haired, gaudy in a bright green dress that fitted her slender figure a bit too snugly.

Garrett picked her because she was less coarse than the others, less brazen. And because she seemed, behind her professional smile, somewhat unhappy whereas all the others appeared slightly bored. She was at a table with a couple men who might have been ordinary cowhands or rustlers and horse thieves; it was difficult to tell, for outlaws seldom appeared different

from honest men. When she left the table, Garrett moved away from the bar and intercepted her as she circulated about the crowded room.

"Have a drink with a lonely man?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Sure," she replied, and gave him that forced professional smile. She tried to sound cheerful. "That's what I'm here for, to see that you're not lonely."

Most of the tables were occupied, but she led Garrett to one far back in the room near the piano-player. There was a poker game at the nearest table. Nobody paid any attention to Garrett and the girl, except a bartender who hurried to serve them. Garrett ordered whiskey for them both, knowing he would be charged for that though the girl would be served some cheap, non-alcoholic drink. He took out makings, rolled a smoke, asked, "What's your name?"

"Rita."

"Know me, Rita?"

She gave him her first direct look, shook her head. "Should I?"

He laughed shortly, lighted his cigarette, and the bartender came with their drinks. He paid, and the bartender went away. "No, you shouldn't recognize me," he said. "This is the first time I've been in Sod Town in months. I had a friend who came here often, though." He watched her closely. "George Mowery."

Her smile faded and a bleak look crossed her face.

Garrett knew then that he'd picked the right girl. "I got your note," he said. "But a little too late. No, not too late. The fault was mine. I wasn't able to save George. I tried, but I failed."

She didn't say anything, but tears filled her eyes. "Why did you come here?" she asked hollowly.

"George is dead," he told her. "I can't change that. But with your help, I may be able to make somebody pay for what happened to him." He saw a frightened look come into her eyes. She glanced uneasily about. "What are you afraid of, Rita?" he asked.

"I can't help you. I don't know anything."

"You mean that you don't care what happened to George?"

"No! No, not that. But if I meddle in something that's none of my business...." Her voice trailed away. She was looking about again in that frightened way. It was evident that she was worried about someone she feared seeing her with Garrett.

He too looked around, and now saw Red Tyson and the Seaton brothers had come into the place and were at the bar. None of them was looking toward him and the girl. He couldn't see anybody watching them.

Garrett said, "Would you talk if I took you to a place where you'd be safe?"

"Where would that be?"

"Denton."

"That's where they took George."

"No harm will come to you there."

She looked at him bleakly. "There's no safe place in No Man's Land," she said. "But I liked George Mowery. I liked him more than any man I ever knew." Suddenly she appeared determined, almost grim. "I'll do it, Garrett. I'll take a chance on you. George told me you were all right.... Listen; go to the livery stable. Tell the hostler to give you the sorrel mare Rita sometimes rides. He has a side-saddle. I'll be there in ten minutes."

She rose abruptly, went to the stairway in the rear corner of the room. Garrett watched her hurry upstairs, and he had to admire her spirit. She was badly frightened, yet she would risk whatever it was she feared to see that the death of a man she had liked was avenged.

Garrett rose, headed for the door. He saw Red Tyson turn and watch him leave the place.

THE ONLY light in the livery stable was a dim lantern inside. Where Garrett waited with the horses outside the building, it was inky dark.

The night was moonless, and the stable stood well apart from the better lighted buildings. Rita was a swiftly moving shadow when she finally came, after many more than ten minutes had passed. Garrett asked, "All right?" And she whispered, "Yes, yes." She was carrying a cheap traveling bag, and he tied it behind the cantle of his dun's saddle, then helped her mount the sorrel. He was about to mount when a pounding of hoofs rose above the town's other sounds, and he saw the shadowy figures of three riders coming at a hard run from the center of town.

He caught Rita's mount by the headstrap, turned it about, said, "Ride out. I'll catch up with you." He gave the sorrel mare a hard slap across the rump. It carried Rita back along the side of the livery stable, and then the three riders were close.

Garrett didn't know how he knew there was danger; it was some sixth sense that warned him. He swung back inside the wide stable door, and drew his gun. The three riders might have been some likkered-up cowhands shooting up the town as they headed for their spread but for the fact that all their shots—nearly a dozen shots—were aimed at the stable. Garrett heard the slugs thudding into the plank wall and shrieking through the doorway.

He held his fire despite his knowledge that this was an attack on his life. Then, as they swept on out of town, he ran out to his horse. The dun was a little spooked, tried to shy away, but he caught it up and swung to the saddle. He rode in the direction Rita had gone, looking back over his shoulder. They didn't come after him.

It was some minutes before he found Rita in the inky darkness. She had reined in to wait for him well out on the prairie. "What was it? What happened?" she asked.

"Three hombres tried to gun me down."

"Who—who were they?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "On a guess I'd say Jess and Cole Seaton and that tough-hand who rides for them, Red Tyson." He couldn't see Rita's face clearly, but it seemed very pale now. "Red Tyson was the witness against George Mowery," he added. "Could it be that Tyson is interested in you and framed George, out of jealousy, because George and you were friendly?"

"No," the girl replied. "Tyson never showed any interest in me."

"How about one of the Seatons?"

"No. It was something bigger, Garrett."

He nodded. "I figured so, but wanted to be sure," he said. "What was it?"

"George started coming to Sod Town because he'd been losing cattle to rustlers," Rita said. "He hoped to find out who the men were that raided his range. He believed that there was an organized band of rustlers and horse thieves bossed by one man. He wanted to find out most of all who that man is."

Garrett nodded. "George was a smart one," he murmured. "A little smart for his own good. He should have let me in on it. He couldn't have found out the identity of the man he was after, or he would have told the vigilantes."

"He didn't trust them."

"No, I guess not. And once they were convinced he was a thief, they wouldn't take his word for anything anyway." Garrett swore under his breath. "But he must have been close to finding out—and that was why he was framed."

It was a warm night, but Rita began to shiver. "We'd better go, Garrett," she said huskily, chilled by fear. It was apparent that she felt that something like what had happened to George Mowery might happen to her.

IT WAS midnight when they reached Denton, and there were but a few windows showing lamplight. Garrett halted at Barton's store, then

led Rita up the open stairway at the side of the building. He knocked on the door to the Bartons' living quarters, and shortly a pencil of light gleamed between door and sill. Louise asked, "Who is it?" and unlocked and opened the door as soon as Garrett told her his name.

She had put on a wrapper over her nightgown, and slippers. Her hair was prettily tousled. She said, "Jim, is something wrong?" Then her eyes widened at sight of Rita. "Come in," she invited, without waiting for a reply to her question.

He was carrying Rita's bag. He took her arm, seeing that she was embarrassed. He could guess what was running through her mind: that Louise was one kind of a woman, and she another. He too felt a bit uneasy now, wondering if he had done the right thing in bringing her to Louise. He introduced them, and explained to Louise that Sod Town was no longer safe for Rita now that she had talked to him about George Mowery.

Louise smiled, said sincerely, "I'm glad you came here, Rita. It will be nice having company. I'm sure we'll get on, and that you'll like my brother." She turned back to Garrett. "Stay a little while. I'll make coffee and—"

There was a footfall on the platform outside, then a demanding knock on the door. A voice called, "It's Phil, Louise. Is something wrong?"

She opened the door for Langley, and he removed his hat as he entered. He looked at Garrett, and frowned. He looked at Rita, and seemed puzzled. He said, "I was working late in my office. I saw your light and the two horses in front of the store. I thought there might be something wrong." He didn't ask for an explanation, but his manner demanded one. "With Steve away, and you alone...."

Louise glanced at Garrett, letting him explain if he wished.

He said, "You may as well know about this, Langley, since you defended George Mowery at his so-called trial. Rita here is the girl George was seeing at Sod Town. She tells me that he was trying to get a line on what he believed was an organized band of rustlers and horse thieves bossed by somebody with brains. After she'd talked to me she was afraid to stay in Sod Town."

Langley nodded. "I see," he said gravely.

"Just as we were about to leave there," Garrett went on, "three riders tried to gun me down. I didn't get a good look at them, but I'd swear it was Red Tyson and Jess and Cole Seaton."

"And so?" Langley prompted.

"I think those three framed George because he was close to finding out that they were mixed up with the outlaw crowd," said Garrett. "Maybe he was close to learning that the Seatons headed the crowd."

Langley took out and lighted a cigar, his face very thoughtful. "You've a point there," he said slowly. "But it's rather weak. Why did they go to so much trouble to get rid of Mowery in such a fashion when a gun would have been an easier method?"

"George had a reputation for being a fast man with a gun," Garrett said. "Not many men would have risked bucking him in a gun-fight. And he was too sharp to be bushwhacked."

"What do you intend doing about all this?"

"Just what you think—get them."

"You'll need more proof than you have. Real evidence."

"There's a way," said Garrett. "Red Tyson. I've a hunch that if I can get him alone I'll be able to coax him into talking."

Langley looked Jim Garrett over, as though seeing him for the first time; he sized him up—weighed, measured him. "I think you may, Garrett," he said finally. "And if you need help, call on me."

Garrett said, "Thanks." Turning to Louise, he said, "I'll have that cup of coffee another time. I'd better head back to Half Moon Creek now." He smiled at Rita. "You'll be all right," he told her.

Louise went to the door with him, touched his arm. "Be careful, Jim," she said, low-voiced. "Very careful."

Phil Langley's frown showed that he didn't like that.

IT WAS NEARLY dawn when Garrett reached his camp on the Half Moon. He put up his horse, then went to the soddie that served as G-Bar's ranchhouse. Lumber was being freighted in from the railroad in Kansas, so one day it would be a real ranch headquarters instead of just a cow camp. Garrett thought of that as he entered the sod house, and a voice in his mind seemed to say, "Unless you end up like George Mowery." He turned in without waking Hank Baugher, and when he woke two hours later, at daylight, the old cowhand had breakfast on the stove.

They ate and then talked, Garrett telling Hank what had happened to George and about his trip to Sod Town. The oldtimer swore, muttered, "George was a good man in any company. And for a young bucko, he was plenty smart."

"Too smart," Garrett said. "He should have let me in on it."

"He was right about there being an organized band, Jim."

"Yeah."

"And it's ramrodded by somebody a lot shrewder than the Seatons," Hank went on. "I know that pair. They're not so tough and not very bright. The man George was after is some tricky son who's playing both ends against the middle, and cashing in big. He's doing what's almost impossible, getting rich in No Man's Land. I'd gamble on that. He's probably in solid with the vigilantes—maybe he's one of them—while bossing the outlaw crowd. Who'd the vigilantes ever nail besides innocent George Mowery? Only some petty cow and horse thieves. They never touch the big fellows. I'm warning you, amigo, don't trust any man but me!"

Garrett had long ago come to respect old Hank Baugher's wisdom. He said, "Maybe somebody like Russ Malone, who calls himself 'sheriff?'"

"Naw. Malone's like the Seatons, not bright enough."

"Judge Harmon?"

"Smart enough, but too o'd," said Hank. "Me. I'd suspicion a hombre like that storekeeper, Steve Barton. Or that dude who's trying to bring homesteaders into the Strip, Phil Langley."

Garrett rolled and lighted a smoke, thinking it over. "Not Barton," he said. Because of Louise, he didn't want it to be Steve. "He's too much of a tenderfoot. Not Langley. He tried to save George from being hanged. He acted as George's lawyer, anyway." He smoked a while in silence. Then: "There are plenty of others, and, like you say, I'm not taking a chance on trusting anybody."

"What you aiming to do?"

"Go after Red Tyson. Make him talk."

"I'm with you," said Hank. "Let's go."

They saddled mounts, Garrett a a rangy gray and Hank a sorrel, and rode north. G-Bar range extended north from the Half Moon to some rough country a half dozen miles away. It was a stretch of brush and rock country, with jutting cliffs and deep gorges, perhaps half a mile wide. Shortly after entering the badlands, Hank looked back from a rocky ridge and sighted a dust cloud off to the southeast. "Looks like company for the G-Bar," he said. "A big bunch of riders from the direction of Denton. What you make of it?"

Garrett shook his head.

Hank didn't seem to like it. "I'll ride back and have a look," he said. "Wait for me here, boss."

He turned back, lifting his sorrel to a lope once he reached open prairie. Garrett reached into his pocket for makings. An uneasy feeling grew in him. Usually when a bunch of riders showed up by night, it was some of the outlaw crowd.... And by day, the vigilantes. He was sure that this bunch —either outlaw or vigilante—was gunning for him.

IT WAS TWO hours before Garrett saw Hank returning. He left the shade of the boulder in which he had been waiting, mounted, rode slowly through the rough stretch to meet the old cowpuncher. There was a worried look on Hank's grizzled face. "The vigilantes, Jim," he reported. "Gunning for you. I had one time convincing them you'd ridden south toward Texas." He grinned. "Talked myself blue in the face, and even then Russ Malone had a notion I was lying. He threatened to rough me up, but I pulled my gun on him. Twelve of them. Denton men, a couple ranchers and three, four cowhands. They were riding so hard their horses will be done in before they hit the Texas line."

"What are they after me for?"

"For killing Red Tyson."

"What?"

"That's what they claimed," Hank said. "It seems that Red and the Seatons hit Denton from somewhere a little after midnight. They went to the Star to quench the thirst they'd worked up night-riding. They were there about an hour, until the Star closed, all of them pretty well likkered up. They were riding from town when somebody back-shot at Red. The Seatons claimed it was too dark for them to see the killer, but they're blaming you. They figure it was you getting revenge on Red for being a witness against George."

Garrett swore under his breath.

"The Seatons with the vigilantes?"

"Nope. And that's mighty queer, ain't it?"

Garrett nodded. "Hank, I'm going after those two," he said. "I'm being framed like George was, and Jess and Cole Seaton are doing the framing." A sudden thought came, a jarring suspicion. He'd said that he would find the man bossing the outlaw crowd by forcing Red Tyson to talk. "Hank, was Phil Langley with that bunch?"

"No. Why?"

"Got an idea," Garrett told him. "Hank, you watch for that vigilante crowd. They may figure you lied to them, and maybe guess that I went after the Seatons. If they show up, you come after me so I'll be warned in time. Blame it, Hank; they're not going to hang me!"

He wheeled his horse about, struck out at a hard run.

Slashed-S headquarters consisted of a squat plank house with a tarpaper roof from which a pipe chimney jutted, a plank barn, a pole corral. There was a shallow creek just south of the place, with a stand of scrub cottonwoods which the Seatons no doubt prized since there was no sign that an axe had ever touched the clump. Despite the stream, which perhaps dried up at times, there was a well in the ranchyard. Cole Seaton was now drawing a pail of water.

Garrett had approached without being seen, without seeing signs of life here until Cole appeared. He was sitting his blowing horse amid the cottonwoods, screened by them, eyeing Cole Seaton.

Cole looked like a man who had been drunk and slept through the morning. He drank from the wooden pail, slopping water over his chest, like a man famished for moisture. He was bareheaded, in his undershirt, but wore his gun. His swarthy face was bristly with a week's growth; his coal-black hair was unkempt, straggly. The other Seaton was burly; Cole was a lean hound, and, with this hangover, wolf-mean. He slammed down the pail, and it fell from the well-wall to the ground. Cole gave it a kick, and swore when it hurt his foot.

Garrett waited for Jess to show himself, wanting to have them both within reach of his gun when he made his play, but he didn't appear. Cole turned back to the house, then froze as Garrett's horse stamped and switched and a jingle of bit-chain sounded. Cole remained still for a second or two, giving Garrett time to pull his Winchester from its boot and lever a cartridge into its firing chamber, then Seaton slowly turned and, hand to gun, stared at the cottonwoods.

Garrett said, "Long range for a hand-gun, mister. Better drop yours. Drop it, then call your brother out here."

Cole gulped, his knobby Adam's apple bobbing. Then, very carefully, he lifted his gun from its holster and flung it a good distance from him. It landed close to the well. He turned toward the house, yelled, "Jess! Come out here, Jess!" Then, lifting his voice to a bellow: "Jess, it's Garrett!" The warning out, he whipped around and rushed back to the well. He gained it in a dive that dropped him flat behind the low circular stone wall, and he retrieved his gun at the same time. Garrett swore. He'd expected the man to make a break for the house, if a break was made. He squeezed a shot well-ward, to keep Cole down, then swung his attention to the house. He dropped from his horse, crouched behind the trunk of a tree, and a rifle slug suddenly ripped through the foliage of the cottonwoods. Jess had come from a door at the back, and was shooting around the rear corner of the house.

It was wild shooting, Jess not exposing enough of himself to take aim. He fired four fast shots in Garrett's general direction, then ducked entirely back around the corner. Cole tried a shot with his six-shooter. Garrett shifted his position, moving through the trees until he was close to the edge of the grove and flanked the rear of the house. Jess appeared, readying his rifle for some more wild shooting. He saw Garrett, and a look of shocked alarm was a spasm on his heavy face. Garrett yelled, "Drop it, Jess!" Jess took a backward step, then started shooting.

Garrett fired one shot, knew that it would find its mark as he squeezed the trigger. He started running forward as the slug tore into the man. He was halfway to him as Jess collapsed. He knew that Jess was dead as he ran past the sprawled figure. Circling the house, he heard Cole call out wildly, "Jess! You get him, Jess?"

Garrett came out from this side of the house, behind Cole crouched there by the well. He had his chance to kill the man, but dead, Cole would be of no use to him. As Seaton shot a startled look over his shoulder, Garrett lunged at him. Cole yelped in alarm, swung about. He pulled the trigger of his gun the same instant that Garrett hit him alongside the head with the stock of his rifle. Cole sank down, lay sprawled loosely. Garrett swayed. There seemed to be a red-hot branding iron jabbing into his left side. His shirt was suddenly stained a wet red.

HE GRITTED his teeth, willed himself to stand the pain. He waited for Cole to regain consciousness. He'd gone into the house, found a fairly clean shirt which, when ripped apart and the pieces folded neatly, made a bandage for the deep crease over his ribs. The flow of blood had slowed, seemed about to stop. Cole was slow in coming around. Garrett rolled a smoke with shaky fingers while he waited. Finally Cole groaned, stirred. He came to with a jerk, stared up at Garrett. "Jess?" he muttered. "He's dead?"

"Like you'll be if you don't talk," said Garrett flatly. He patted the rifle in the crook of his arm. "Don't think I'll fool around with you. Sit up—and talk."

Cole sat up, back to the well-wall. He looked sick.

"Red Tyson," Garrett said. "Who killed him?"

"Who...?" The man's surprise seemed genuine. "What are you trying to pull, anyway? You killed Red, just like you killed Jess!"

"You can't swear to that."

"I'd swear to it, all right!"

"You were likkered up," said Garrett. "So was Jess. It was pitch dark, and the shot came from behind. Listen, Seaton; I've a hunch about this business, but I need to know a little something. The vigilantes are riding, hunting me, and when a man's hunted for a hangrope he's apt to be

desperate enough to kill often. I'm trying to convince you, hombre, that I'm in a mood to kill you."

He pointed the .30-30 at the man's chest.

"For God's sake, Garrett...!"

"You and Jess and Red were in with the outlaw crowd," Garrett said. "You three were handling stolen horses and rustled cattle on a big scale. Right?"

"Well...."

"Right?"

"Yeah," said Cole Seaton, having trouble with his breathing. "Our Slashed-S ranch was used as a holding pasture for stolen stock. The rustlers and horse thieves brought their catch here, and we held the stolen stock until it could be driven to some market outside the Strip. We were handling maybe five hundred and fifty head of horses a month. We got paid a dollar a head. That's the truth, Garrett. We never did any stealing, ourselves. A bunch of Sod Towners did the dirty work."

"And George Mowery was framed because he was too curious, eh?"

"We had orders. We threw some stolen horses onto his range."

"Who gave you orders?"

Seaton's frightened expression had gradually faded as he talked, and now a shrewd look crossed his face. "I ain't saying," he said. "So long as I don't tell you that, you won't kill me. You—"

Garrett stepped back, lifted the

"You need me to prove it," the man look into the Winchester's muzzle for a moment, then said, his finger on the trigger, "Friend, I already know. The man giving you orders and bossing the rustling is Phil Langley."

"Garrett, wait—"

"What for?"

"You need me to prove it," the man said wildly—but shrewdly. "Kill me, and you can't prove it on Langley." He was a beggar, but still he had a bargaining point and knew it. "You need me, Garrett. Can't you see that?"

Garrett lowered the rifle. "Saddle a horse," he said. "We're riding to Denton."

HE RODE behind his prisoner, and he kept the horses moving at a steady lope. He'd been right. He'd made a good guess. Last night he told Phil Langley that he would find out what he wanted to know by catching Red Tyson and making him talk. Langley had been impressed. He'd decided—even as Garrett spoke, maybe—to kill Tyson. Maybe he'd known that Garrett would be blamed. Another frame-up. Maybe Langley would have offered to defend Garrett as he'd defended George Mowery.... Hank Baugher had been right, too. It took a smart man for the tricky kind of game being played here in No Man's Land.

"Damn him," Garrett muttered.

He wasn't feeling so good by the time he sighted Denton. He was leaking blood again, and with it his strength. His vision was blurred at times, and his head ached. He told Seaton to stay away from the street. They circled, came in behind Barton's general store, dismounted there. Garrett's legs were wobbly.

"Inside," he told Seaton. "Keep in front of me."

Seaton was resigned, his nerve broken, and so obedient. Otherwise he might have been aware of Garrett's weakened condition, and not been so submissive. They entered a stockroom, then the main storeroom. Steve Barton was back from his Kansas trip, and was talking to Louise and Rita. They fell silent, staring at Garrett and his prisoner, then Louise saw something in Garrett's appearance that alarmed her. "Jim, you're hurt!" she cried, and hurried toward him.

He was not unaware of her concern, but he ignored it because he felt that he wasn't able to hold up much longer. He said, "Louise, I came here first because—well, because I think this concerns you."

She was quick, she understood. "You mean Phil...?"

"Yes. I'm sorry if you're going to

be hurt," he said, and searched her face. "Seaton here has talked. Langley is the brains behind an organized crowd of rustlers and horse thieves."

Louise's expression didn't change. She was held off by his words, by his manner, but she continued to watch him anxiously. She said, "I think I suspected it, Jim. After Red Tyson was killed, I began to wonder. I knew that it wasn't like you to shoot a man in cold blood. I knew that you wanted to make Tyson talk. I remembered that you had told Phil that you'd make Tyson talk." She shook her head. "Jim, I'm not in love with him. I learned to know him—too well. Ambition is all right, but he is obsessed."

"All right, Louise," Garrett said. He turned to her brother. "Steve, keep Seaton safe. He's our witness. I'm going after Langley."

"Not alone, Jim," said Barton. "You look done in."

"Alone," said Garrett firmly. "I owe it to George Mowery."

They did not try to stop him, perhaps aware of how much it meant to him. He walked unsteadily to the street, aiming for the shack-office bearing a sign that read "Neutral Strip Development Company." He saw, yet was only vaguely aware of the few people on the street. He heard but ignored one man's wild shout: "That's Garrett! He's the back-shooter that killed Tyson!"

That shout reached into Langley's office, and now he came hurrying out. He must have thought that the vigilantes were returning with Garrett a prisoner, for, upon seeing Garrett alone and coming at him, he stopped dead and a look of consternation froze on his face.

Garrett said, "Got a gun, Langley?"

The man stared at him, dazed.

"I don't believe in vigilantes and kangaroo courts, Langley," Garrett said, his voice utterly toneless. "But that's what you'll get unless you accept the break I'm giving you. Cole Seaton's talked, Langley. You're done for. Now how will it be—a gun or a kangaroo court trial?"

Langley looked wildy about. He shouted, almost screamed it, "Shoot him down! He murdered Red Tyson!"

Nobody took him up on that, for Steve Barton was in the street with a double-barreled shotgun. The storekeeper had signalled the others to keep out of it. Langley uttered a strangling cry, then turned and bolted. There was a ground-hitched horse standing before McDade's blacksmith shop, and the fleeing man swerved toward it. Garrett started after him, but his knees buckled after a couple running steps. He fell to his hands and knees. Langley was grabbing for the horse's trailing reins when Garrett swung his gun up and fired.

Langley screamed, fell, shot through the right leg. He lost his hold on the reins, and the horse shied away from him. Crablike, he crawled after the animal. He caught hold of the left stirrup, but was unable to pull himself up. He clung to the stirrup, and drew a gun from inside his coat with his right hand. He had his fear under control now, and realized his desperate need for time. He had to silence Garrett's gun before he made another attempt to gain the saddle. His last hope was in the shot he fired at Garrett, and it went wild. Garrett's gun roared again, and Langley lost his grip on the stirrup—on life itself—and fell face down in the dust.

THEY FUSSED over Jim Garrett, Rita and Louise. Once he was helpless in Steve Barton's bed upstairs over the store, they were woman-like in the care they gave him —overly solicitous. He protested. He growled, man-fashion, "I'm not that bad off. All I need is a little rest." It was after all but a slight wound, and now, with it treated and bandaged, he wouldn't lose any more blood and would get back his strength. It was Rita, a greatly altered Rita already, who said, "Better get used to it, Jim.

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SANDY MacCLOUD'S RAWHIDE REASONING

by FRANCIS L. FUGATE

Sandy didn't want to dance to Curt Devlin's gun music, but then he didn't want to die either . . . . .

SANDY MacCLOUD, of purest Scotch ancestry, had been in Cottonwood Bend exactly one and one-half minutes when he walked into the Golden Eagle for a wee nip. He had spent the first minute in town determining that his precious fishing rod had weathered the stage ride from Abilene. In the remaining half minute he learned that Greg Harrington of the Rafter-D was well known in Cottonwood Bend, but that he had not met the stage. Sandy promptly located the town's only saloon.

After the ride from Abilene, Sandy was in sore need of a wee nip. Every bone in his body ached from the merciless pounding of the springless stage coach. In fact, bones were about all there was of his body to ache. He was six foot one and built on about the proportions as the spoke of a Conestoga wagon wheel.

As Sandy approached a vacant space at the bar the bartender shoved a bottle toward him—a clear bottle, half full of glistening red liquid. Beside the bottle he placed a small empty glass.

"Stranger, you're drinkin' with Curt Devlin," he announced cryptically. His lips drew a thin grim line under his graying mustache.

Surprised, Sandy eyed the bottle, shuddering inwardly at the raw, red look of the stuff. "Am I now?" He smiled as cheerfully as possible on top of the long, hot, dusty ride from Abilene. "And I'll be most happy to join Mr. Devlin, whoever he is," he watched the bottle warily as if it could bite, "if you'll just set out a bottle of bonnie Heather Dew, or Loch Lomond, or even—"

"What's the matter with my whiskey?"

Sandy started at the sound of the husky grating voice close by his elbow. He turned to look into a pair of frowning red-rimmed, beady black eyes. Under the frowning eyes were a craggy red nose and a hard-cut mouth,. chiseled from bloodless lips. The mouth was twisted into a snarl that sent sudden cold chasing up the middle of Sandy's back. Crazily the thought spun through his head—the doctor said he must not get excited.

"When you drink with Curt Devlin, you drink Curt Devlin's likker." A painfully hard finger flicked out and prodded Sandy's ribs. "Red-eye—a man's drink!" He rasped a mocking laugh and looked about the saloon. "There must be a man of some sort under them store togs." His rasping laughter was echoed by cowhands up and down the bar.

The bartender moved the glass conveniently close to Sandy's fingers and poured it brimming with the red liquid.

"But I never drink anything but Scotch," protested Sandy, quickly drawing his hand away from the glass. "My father was a Scotsman, my grand—"

The bartender leaned close to Sandy's ear. "I'd drink with Mr. Devlin, sir, if I was you." His voice low and

charged with hope. "I wish you would, sir." He cleared his throat apologetically. "Besides, we ain't got none of that other stuff you mentioned."

"No Scotch?" A saloon without Scotch whiskey was so surprising that Sandy completely forgot the menace of the burning-eyed man at his elbow. "But what do people drink?"

"They drink red-eye an' like it!" snarled Curt. He grabbed the bottle from the bar and tipped it to his mouth. It gurgled, and when he set it back the level of the liquid was noticeably lower. He brought his face so close that Sandy could feel the heat of his nauseating whiskey-laden breath. "An' you'll drink red-eye, or my name ain't Curt Devlin." Weaving slightly, he backed away, as if better to watch Sandy's full length. His glazed eyes were like a cat's watching a very small mouse.

"Mon, l-let's think it over." The Highland burr twisted Sandy's tongue as his heart quickened. He didn't like the look of Curt's eyes—a wild look of hate. "I dinna ken your customs. I'm a stranger in—"

"*Drink!*" Devlin's voice cracked, and a Colt seemed to materialize at his fingertips. Sandy found himself looking down the gloomy blackness of its .45 caliber barrel. "Or you'll dance to Curt Devlin's music."

There was scrambling as the population of the Golden Eagle moved to clear the space behind Sandy. "Please, sir," pleaded the bartender, "it's only one drink." He looked helplessly at Sandy and then at the already bullet-pocked mirror behind the bar.

"Two drinks!" rasped Devlin. He reached the bottle again, and a full inch disappeared. He smacked his lips noisily and held the bottle toward Sandy.

"Hoot mon, maybe with a wee drop of water I c'd manage." Fear was pushing at Sandy's heart until he could hardly make his voice recognizable through the thick Scotch accent. Devlin was swaying on his feet, but the Colt remained as steady as a rock. A familiar pain caught in Sandy's chest. He couldn't breathe, and he knew that in a moment he would faint away. "No excitement, Sandy, and lots of fresh air," the doctor had said. "You'll have to go West where it's high and dry and healthy."

Bitterly Sandy remembered. From his viewpoint the West might be high and dry, but it was definitely unhealthy. His life now seemed to be measured by the ticking of a watch rather than a calendar. Desperately he wished that he had looked for Greg Harrington instead of coming to the Golden Eagle. Slowly he reached for the bottle, his stomach already burning from mere thought of the fiery liquor. The room was growing hazy and Curt Devlin was a vague swimming outline from which the Colt's barrel protruded.

"Drop that gun, Curt!"

THE SUDDEN voice was low, but there was authority in its cold hard tone. The effect was immediate. Devlin relaxed his grip on the Colt and it cluttered to the floor. He shook his head slowly, as if trying to awaken himself. Then his glazed black eyes rolled white, his knees buckled, and he grabbed at the edge of the bar—too late. He slumped to a sitting position, his head bobbing forward to his knees. The bottle crashed on the rough plank floor, spreading a puddle about his feet.

"Passed out," whispered the bartender thankfully. He leaned toward Sandy. "Stranger, if I was you, I'd be out of Cottonwood Bend before he wakes up, 'cause he's liable to want another drink, an' then he'll remember you."

But Sandy wasn't listening. He had recognized the voice, and was looking for Greg Harrington. Dimly he saw him holstering his gun as he stepped across Devlin's feet with contemptuous disregard. Sandy gripped the extended hand.

"Mon, ye were just in time." The pain subsided in Sandy's chest as he took his first deep breath in many minutes.

A smile wrinkled the rancher's bronzed face. "I was late meeting the stage, but I figured I'd find you here."

"Next to a nip or so of Heather Dew along the way, you're the most welcome sight since I left Saint Louis." Sandy surveyed the meager stock of bottles behind the bar and shook his head sadly.

Greg broke into a ringing laugh. "You old son-of-a-gun!" He slapped the Scotsman's shoulder. "You wait till we get to the ranch. I think there's an inch or so left in that bottle you gave me." He nodded meaningfully. "But when that's gone, it's the last between here and Abilene."

"Kansas City," put in the bartender. "I tended bar in Abilene."

"*No!*" Sandy whispered unbelievingly. "No Heather Dew?" he asked, and the bartender shook his head.

"What in tarnation is this 'Leather Do' stuff?" asked one of the cowpunchers who were crowding back up to the bar.

"Heather Dew," corrected Sandy, feeling genuinely sorry for anyone so ignorant of life's pleasures. "Heather Dew is Scotch whiskey—the very breath of the Highlands," he explained reverently. "Smoky, ripe, mellow, wonderful—" The only way to describe it was with one's hands in the air, and he could see by the blankness of the cowhands' faces that they didn't understand. "It's not such liquor as sets a man's stomach and mind on fire. It's a bonnie—"

"Until you start to walk," interrupted the bartender, "an' then you stroll right out across the ceiling like a bloomin' fly."

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed a wide-eyed waddy. He licked his lips thoughtfully and stared at the ceiling.

"If you was goin' to be around long," said the bartender, "I'd get a bottle so these saddle stiffs could just taste what some people drink."

"It tastes like hair tonic that has been used to put out a fire," said another puncher. "I had some in Kansas City once." He puckered his mouth ruefully.

Sandy disdained this outright blasphemy. He brightened at the supply of Heather Dew. "Order a case," he told the bartender eagerly. "I've come out here for my health," he explained, "and I'm going to be working for the Rafter-D." He looked around and was surprised to see Greg frowning.

The man who had been to Kansas City looked narrowly at Sandy. "I reckon you'll just be stayin' till Devlin goes on another spree," he said, jerking his thumb toward the inert body. "Unless you're mighty handy with a six-gun, which I don't see you wearin'."

"I guess we'd better get your gear and head for the Rafter-D," said Greg quickly, and Sandy followed him through the swinging doors of the Golden Eagle.

"DOGGONE IT, Sandy, can't you understand? You're welcome to stay at the Rafter-D as long as you please."

Sandy clutched the bouncing buckboard with one hand, and held his fishing rod aloft with the other. "I've got to earn my keep," he said stubbornly.

"But I just can't give you a job like we talked about in Saint Louis." Greg shook his head sadly. "The cattle business is bad—what with big herds comin' up from Texas an' the homesteaders fencin' all the water." He waved his hand toward the semi-arid desert stretching off toward the white-capped mountains in the hazy blue distance. "We're on such short grass that I got to make every hand count. And besides, takin' that load of old buffalo hides off my hands will pay your keep for a long time. That was the dumbest trade I ever made."

Sandy shook his head. He had come West for his health, but it was a poor Scotsman who couldn't work his own way.

Suddenly Greg snapped his fingers. "You can cook! That's it—my cook left—"

The rancher's voice faded away as Sandy again shook his head. "Nothing but fish, and tea, and maybe a little broth."

Greg glanced at the fishing rod in Sandy's hand. "You and your fishing! It's few fish you'll catch out here," he said. "The cat-fish in that creek in Cottonwood Bend is the only fishing short of those mountains, and that's a long ride."

Sandy looked at the sagebrush and cactus lining the faint dusty ruts that reached endlessly ahead, and then at the mountains peeking over the horizon. They were a lot farther than the cool Ozark trout streams had been from Saint Louis. This was worse than being without Heather Dew.

"Workin' for that fur place in Saint Louis was sorta like a store—" Greg stopped. "Nope, that won't do. Bein' in Cottonwood Bend you'd be too close to Curt Devlin."

"Mon, why should he hold a grudge? And with him fuzzy, he'll nae remember."

"You don't know Devlin," said Greg. "He's just plain mean. When he's drunk he remembers everything that happened when he was drunk before, an' when he's sober he remembers what happened when he was sober—only he ain't sober much."

"Would he hae shot?" Something hot seemed to be crawling about in Sandy's stomach as he thought of the big Colt.

"Only at your feet," said Greg, as if that didn't really matter. "Curt's a great one for making the pilgrims dance." He frowned. "But the next time he goes on a spree he'll remember, an' he'll think about it until he hates you." Greg glanced over his shoulder and quickly reined up. "Can you use a gun?" he asked matter-of-factly. His eyes had narrowed and his voice was tense.

SANDY JERKED around and saw a distant cloud of dust on their back trail. Again he felt the pain burn his chest. Curt Devlin was coming, sure as sin! The crawling in Sandy's stomach turned into a churning sickness. He gripped the fishing rod until his fingers hurt. He remembered Devlin's hand flickering down and coming up with the Colt—faster than a hungry trout could strike a fly. If he had stayed in Saint Louis! It might have been only a year, like the doctor said—but he would have lived out that year. Sandy couldn't look away from the rapidly approaching dust.

The plume grew larger and two mules became distinguishable at its head. "It's the Dry River freight," said Greg. There was relief in his voice. "I should have known it would catch up with us."

Sandy was breathing again by the time the heavy freight wagon drew opposite their buckboard, but his pounding heart was not back to normal. Swearing lustily, the muleskinner stopped in the swirling dust kicked up by the eight double-hitched mules.

"Cliff Bryson!" exclaimed Greg. "What're you doing on this end of the line? I thought you never got east of Dry River."

"I don't," said the teamster, removing his hat to mop his forehead, "except when my dadblamed muleskinners get gold fever an' quit, an' I have to drive double." He spat a brown stream over the side of the freight wagon and for three continuous minutes expounded on hired help in general and muleskinners in particular. Then he uncoiled a long black whip and swung it about his head. "If you see a handy muleskinner, let me know."

Back and forth the whip curled, and then cracked over the heads of the lead team so loudly that Sandy almost jumped out of the buckboard. "Hi-i ya-a-ah!" Bryson uttered a long hoarse cry. The forward mules strained against the wagon's weight, and slowly it started to move.

Greg Harrington waited for the freight wagon's dust to settle before he clucked the buckboard into motion. Sandy watched until the wagon disappeared around a distant mesa. "I could do that," he said.

Greg laughed at the impossibility of such a thing. "What do you know about muleskinnin'?"

"After all, I drove wagons to the wharf when we were loading furs for New Orleans and Cincinnati," said Sandy, somewhat injured.

"But that was one team."

Sandy waved the fishing rod. "It wouldn't be any unhandier than playing a trout in the brush."

Greg shrugged his shoulders, apparently in dismissal of the subject. "You can't do everything with a fishing rod, Sandy," he said. "You may be thin, but not thin enough to hide behind that little pole when Curt Devlin starts paintin' his nose and slingin' his gun."

But Sandy refused to dismiss the subject. He had an idea, and he was going to try it—Curt Devlin or no Curt Devlin.

The next morning Sandy found an old buggy whip and a rawhide lariat in the bunkhouse. He labored industriously until noon when he called Greg to witness a demonstration. He had arranged over-sized wooden guides along the whip, carefully whittled and polished, and had replaited and waxed the lariat into a long spindling streamer. It was not unlike a giant fly-rod, but in place of a leader and a hook he had attached a thin strip of rawhide.

"You see," Sandy explained, "Mr. Bryson's whip was so long that he could only crack it over the lead mules. They had all the work of starting the wagon." He coiled the thin rawhide in his left hand and took the buggy whip in his right. "Watch."

With his elbow tight against his side, he twitched the buggy whip back overhead by a deft movement of his wrist and unloosed a coil of rawhide as he brought it forward and jerked back. Greg jumped at the sharp crack, and horses nickered and reared in the corral. Back and forth the whip swung, on each forward trip picking up more line from Sandy's left hand. Four times in rapid succession it cracked, as if over the heads of four successive teams.

"Well I'll be jumped up and grasshopper pecked!" exclaimed Greg.

THE NEW-FANGLED whip earned Sandy MacCloud a seat atop a freight wagon without difficulty. At both the Cottonwood Bend and Dry River terminals of the Bryson Freight and Stage Line, astonished spectators gathered to watch him start an eight-mule team, and more than one experienced muleskinner wrapped a whipcracker about his face attempting to imitate the act with his own blacksnake.

Sandy was no longer a pilgrim, and it had been a long time since he felt the pain in his chest. He forgot the menace of Curt Devlin, who was on a remarkable period of sobriety, exhibiting no sign of enmity as he worked at various odd jobs about Cottonwood Bend.

Sandy spent most of his spare time trying to get the few catfish in Cottonwood Creek to act like Brown Trout, or Loch Leven Troot, as he called them. By using barbless hooks and releasing the fish, he managed to conserve the stream's stock. However, the few other fishermen of Cottonwood Bend complained bitterly that the fish would now have nothing to do with them, but waited to be caught by Sandy MacCloud on his long wispy fly-rod.

One blistering August afternoon Sandy spent the last twenty miles into Cottonwood Bend solacing himself that he was nearing the little grove of trees and the limpid pool where Bonnie Jo—Scotch for Pretty Sweetheart—stayed. Bonnie Jo was a full eight pounds, and the best fighter of them all. She seemed to allow herself to be hooked because she enjoyed the battle with Sandy. Smart, too—enough to whet any angler's anticipation.

As if this prospect were not sufficient pleasure, the bartender from the Golden Eagle met the freight, waving a bottle in his hand. The Heather Dew had come at last! Sandy fingered the familiar ribbed glass of the brown bottle. He itched to open it on the spot,

but decided that first must come the tussle with Bonnie Jo. Joyfully he took his fly-rod and headed around the stable toward the creek with the bottle under his arm.

Sandy heard a voice behind him. He turned and saw Curt Devlin. The joy dissolved into fear, and his heart seemed to swell and burst in his throat. Curt was carrying a bottle under his arm.

"I've been wantin' to see you in action with that funny fishin' pole of yourn for a long time." Curt hurried to catch up, and fell into step beside Sandy. There was no animosity in his voice or face, in spite of the bottle and the ever-present Colt.

Sandy relaxed. Maybe he had changed since he had been sober for so long, even if Greg Harrington did insist that Curt would never change. Sandy continued toward the pool, and Curt walked beside him.

WHEN THEY arrived at the pool Sandy set the precious bottle of Heather Dew in a safe place, well back from the water. He put the sections of his long rod together, attached the reel, and threaded the line through the guides. Carefully he surveyed the insects on the surface of the water, and selected a fly from a little tin box—a nymph which he had tied himself. He had never tried it before. He heard a popping sound behind him, and turned to see Curt Devlin sniffing the open quart of red liquor.

"You just go ahead," Curt invited. "I'll just sit here comfortable like and watch how you do it." He sat down on a flat rock and tipped the bottle to his mouth.

Cold perspiration seeped out of Sandy's forehead and ran down into his eyes. He remembered Greg's warning and shuddered. But Curt seemed friendly enough.

Resolutely Sandy turned back to the pool, fighting the uneasy fear within himself. He stripped several loops of line from his reel and started the back cast. The line sighed through the air, and he paused until he felt the live line almost straightening out behind him. He brought the long limber rod forward, allowing more line to slip from his fingers and feed through the guides. He knew exactly where Bonnie Jo would be—straight across the pool and far under the big rock ledge. It was a difficult cast. He didn't let the line touch the water the first time—it wasn't far enough yet. Another back cast and more line whispered out across the pool directly at the rock. But still not far enough. Sandy smiled. This time would do it. Smoothly he whipped the rod back just before the line could settle to the water.

"Say, ain't I seen you before—some place besides Cottonwood Bend?"

Sandy froze at the sudden sound of Curt's husky voice. His whole body tingled. He stopped his arm, and the line collapsed in a tangle about him. He looked around to see Curt observing him intently. His black eyes were brighter now, and he frowned as if he were trying to remember.

"No. N-nae, I-I dinna think so." Sandy's voice came out in a shaky squeak.

Curt's eyes narrowed. He took another drink and set the bottle down beside him. "How 'bout Abilene?" he demanded.

"Nae," protested Sandy, "couldna be." He busied himself with untangling the line. It would be best to leave now. Curt was getting drunk and he was getting mean, just like Greg had said he would. He hadn't changed.

Hastily Sandy coiled the line. With an effort he kept his gaze on the ledge across the pool. He almost believed he saw Bonnie Jo's bewhiskered head, looking to see why he was taking so long. He could feel Curt's eyes burning into his back. The conviction grew that he should leave immediately—while he had time. He leaned over to loosen the fishhook from a tangle of brush and saw Curt taking another drink. His nose was red, and his eyes glistened black and beady. His lips were cruel and bloodless as he smacked them in a wiping motion against the back of his hand.

Sandy shuddered. Mr. Bryson would let him drive the west run out of Dry River. He had to get away from Curt Devlin. Quickly he began to reel his line. He was about to remove the leader when he changed his mind. Sandy remembered the first two weeks of terror—of waiting and watching for Curt Devlin to get drunk. Dry River was only forty miles away—he wouldn't be safe even there. And besides, there was no fishing in Dry River. There was a little splash across the pool, as though Bonnie Jo understood in some mysterious way, and had broken water to applaud his decision.

Sandy's throat was dry and aching as he again stripped line from the reel. He had decided to wait for a showdown. He was stronger now, and he might have a chance if Curt didn't go for his gun. Sandy's hands trembled as he prepared for another cast toward Bonnie Jo. Blood pounded in his ears, drowning the rippling of the stream. He could hardly keep from looking toward the rock on which Curt sat.

"By cripes, I remember!"

SANDY WANTED to run, but it was too late. He dropped the rod and turned. Curt was on his feet, his face set in a horrible wide-eyed, drunk-leer.

"This time you drink with Curt Devlin!" Curt took a step forward, holding out the bottle of red-eye.

Sandy's knees went rubbery, and it was suddenly hard to breathe. He was cornered with Curt Devlin on a rocky neck of land—no place to run, and not a chance of Greg Harrington coming to his rescue this time. Fear boiled in his stomach, and then he saw his bottle of Heather Dew, warm and friendly, glistening in the sunlight.

"S-sur-r-re, Mr. Devlin." He started for the Scotch. "I'll drink with you, Mr. Devlin."

"Keep away from that bottle!" Curt's voice snapped out like a whip. Cat-like, he moved between Sandy and the brown bottle. "You'll drink red-eye."

"Nae," said Sandy stubbornly, backing away.

Blinding pain exploded in his face as Curt's right hand licked out to slap him. Sandy tasted blood, and his tongue hurt from biting it. Before he could duck the back of the hard knobby hand caught the other side of his face.

"Drink!" snarled Curt. "Drink, damn you!"

Sandy shook his head to clear the swimming haziness from before his eyes. "I'll nae do it," he insisted.

This time the hand was knotted into a fist, and Sandy went to his hands and knees. His head felt as if it had been torn from his shoulders. Dimly he saw Curt set the bottle of red-eye down and come toward him. He cringed as the heavy boot caught his ribs, racking his body with pain. He rolled on his back, gasping for breath.

Curt straddled him, and Sandy saw a great hairy fist descending. He shut his eyes and his head was driven against the rocks. The world turned spotted red, then glistening gray, and cleared. Desperately Sandy tried to move his arms, but they were pinned under Curt's knees. The weight of his body paralyzed Sandy's threshing legs. Helplessly the Scotsman saw the fist cocked again. He extended his hand toward the bottle of red-eye, but couldn't reach it. Curt Devlin laughed drunkenly.

"Ready to drink with Curt now, eh?" He lurched to his feet.

Painfully Sandy raised to a sitting position. His lips were puffing, his nose was bleeding, and his left eye was closing. He couldn't speak for the swelling of his tongue. He got to his knees. Finally he stood.

Curt had the bottle. He laughed—a crazed, half-animal sound. "An' you'll say, 'Please, Mr. Devlin, can I have a drink?' "

Sandy mouthed his swelling tongue, and wondered if he would be able to speak. He no longer dreaded the red whiskey. With so much pain in his body, he would never feel it. He started toward Curt, and then stopped in

unbelieving horror as he saw Devlin's foot draw back and deliberately kick the Heather Dew. The bottle sailed through the air and crashed in front of Sandy.

THE SMOKY, heady flavor boiled up around him, and with it came a blinding rage. His Heather Dew was gone—the drink for which he had waited long dry months—destroyed by Curt Devlin. In a fit of unseeing rage he grabbed a rock and hurled it wildly. It sailed harmlessly past Curt and splashed in the creek.

Curt's eyes became almost invisible, and his face turned crimson. The Colt snapped into his hand.

"Now you've done it!" he rasped. "Get down on your hands and knees." He set the red-eye in front of him. "You'll crawl to this bottle." He motioned back over his shoulder. "An' then you're goin' to crawl all the way to the Golden Eagle an' dance for Curt Devlin."

The pungent smell of the spilled Scotch whiskey fed the anger in Sandy's heart, but it was futile flame in the face of the Colt. The pain left his body, and so did the fear. There was only trembling rage as he dropped to his knees. Then he felt the fly-rod beneath his hand.

Desperately he gripped it in his right hand. With his left he snatched for the line, and jumped to his feet. He didn't have time even to see how the line laid in his hand. Curt was standing, feet apart, slack-jawed with surprise at Sandy's sudden movement.

Pinning his gaze to the deadly Colt, Sandy brought the rod tip back and forward, loosing the line in his left hand. No time for a false cast. Curt's finger might tighten on the trigger at any moment. This was his only chance, to catch the Colt with the curling leader or the hook.

A swelling pain sealed Sandy's throat. There was too much line in the air—the cast was going over. He jerked the rod tip down and grabbed at the rod with his left hand. With a sudden two-handed jerk he started the back cast. It was like setting a hook against the lightning strike of a mammoth Rainbow. He cringed. Would the leader hold? Would the rod's slender tip break? The Colt roared an ear-shattering blast, but it was sailing over Sandy's head.

"Why you—" Curt bellowed, and lumbered toward Sandy.

Sandy prayed the heavy gun would leave the line on the back cast, and clutched frantically with his left hand to shorten the line. The pole lightened as the leader snaked forward, and the pronged fly caught Curt squarely in the middle of the forehead. He stopped and screamed, grabbing at the welling red gash. Again Sandy brought the rod back and forward. Now the line was under control. This time the hook darted with deadly accuracy to Curt's right ear. Sandy made a savage, ripping set that left the ear hanging in two pieces.

"No!" screamed Curt, cowering and sheltering his head from the flicking hook with both hands. "Please, no!"

"Turn around," Sandy commanded, "and start for the Golden Eagle." He let the hook nick the back of Curt's hand. "I guess it's Sandy MacCloud's music that there'll be dancing to," he said, "and ye'll be learning the Highland Fling."

LONG RANGE FOR A SHORT GUN

(Continued From Page 69)

You won't be a bachelor all your life."

She looked at Louise, and hastily left the room.

"What's she mean by that?" he demanded.

"She's imagining things."

"What things?"

"That you and I are—well, in love."

Garrett lay there staring at her, silent for a long moment. Then he said, "She's half right, anyway. I wish she was wholly right, Louise."

Louise said, "She is, Jim," and came to bend over him.

● THE END

TEXAS IS A RED-HAIRED LADY

by L. L. FOREMAN

★ ★ LUSTY BORDER-WAR YARN ★ ★

Fight for Texas? A black-hearted renegade, a horse thief, a lying gambler? What could the high cause of Texas mean to him?

WHEN BISHOP LAMY banished the old wooden *santos* from the churches of New Mexico, he was too new to the Southwestern country to understand what violence he was doing to its store of legends. The affronted eyes of the eminent pontiff informed him that the *santos* were distressingly low in the scale of art. Representations of relig-

A GOOD GUNFIGHT, THE STRANGER SAID, WAS ALL HE WAS LOOKING FOR!

ious figures they might be, but they were crudely carved from pine and cottonwood, painted with glaring native pigments, and often grotesque in their graphic depiction of some of the aspects of martyrdom. The ears of Bishop Lamy did not hear the miraculous tales that were fastened like barnacles to the aged woods. Away with such hideosities. Let the rough little adobe churches be given the refinement of French and Italian plaster statues.

So the Indians and native New Mexicans bowed to his word and made a busy to-do of destroying their inelegant *santos*....

They keep turning up, those *santos*. They merely went underground for half a century or so. They emerge with their flaws and blemishes intact. Not often with their miraculous tales and legends, though; most of those are lost forever and forgotten. Those that still live do so by the grace of chance, as in the case of the tale of the *santo* belonging to Vigil Velarde in the mountain village of Canoncito near Santa Fe.

Vigil Velarde's *santo* is very old and very tiny, barely an inch tall. It has wandered far in many pockets, Velarde pockets mostly, for Vigil says it has been in his family for a long, long time. Perhaps some early Velarde carried it home south over the deserts and mountains of the Chihuahua Trail. At any rate, Vigil's grandfather brought it back up out of Old Mexico when he moved north. And before that, another Velarde, Don Sabedeo, gave it to his American friend, Christopher St. John, in New Orleans, in 1836. Christopher St. John—"Brother Kit," gambler—had it in his pocket when he went to Texas on the trail of a red-haired lady.

AUGURING the approach of another wilting day, the before-dawn wind rustled in from the Coleto plain, untidily swept the crooked alleys of Goliad, and tossed dust at the stockade of Fannin's Fort. It lightly combed the cottonwood trees along the river, and there fanned the lean and somewhat piratical face of Brother Kit where he slumbered in uncomfortable but expedient seclusion.

Brother Kit awoke. He sighed annoyedly, and tentatively stretched his long frame to discover how many aches it might have. Habit sent his hands to check upon the pair of pistols under his coat. Meanwhile, eyes shut, he fashioned for himself a suitable conclusion to an uncompleted dream featuring a lovely young lady with red hair.

But the ground made a devilish bed. He sat up, swearing. His feet hurt. It must have been all of fifteen miles he tramped yesterday after his horse played out.

His quickening thoughts produced a problem. *If these antigodlin' Texans have grabbed all the horses for their blamed war, where'll I get one?*

To which, in its tough assurance, his ego responded, *You'll manage.*

Between the problem and the careless confidence, he shook his head. It didn't look good. Bold bluff and luck had borne him at a dashing clip for a long time, but lately they had limped pretty badly.

Gently easing his blistered feet into their boots, he came to thinking half seriously of Don Sabe's *santo*. He beat the grayish red Texas dust from his frock-coat and beaver, thinking it over. Superstition he recognized as a weed of ignorance. On the other hand, no man could ever be sure about such matters and anything was worth trying. He had himself at times in desperation dabbled in minor black magic at the gambling tables. And Don Sabe ha' been serious about it, or as serious as he ever got.

"I want you to keep this, Kit," Don Sabe said, the dark night he quit New Orleans. "It came into my family long ago and has been carried around by various Velardes ever since as a talisman, a charm against evil. You may need it more than I, after tonight,"

"Thanks, Sabe. I'll keep it to remember you by. Lucky piece, eh?"

"Yes, but not for gambling, *amigo*. Tradition says that it is to be prayed to only in extremity against evil. If the purpose of your prayer is sinful—" Don Sabe cracked a satyr's grin "—you may arrive at the consummation only to find it purged of its impurity by the little *santo*. That could be inconvenient!"

"H'm, yes. You ever tried it out?"

"Frankly, never. But then, how rare it is for a man to have a desire that contains no evil, *no es verdad?*"

Brother Kit drew it from his pocket, fingering its worn smoothness, there on the bank of the San Antonio River a thousand miles from New Orleans. It represented San Juan Bautista; which, Don Sabe had pointed out, should arouse its special attention toward one bearing the name of St. John.

He held it up before him in the darkness, and cleared his throat. But a strange embarrassment got the better of him. He slipped it back into his pocket, put on his beaver, and struck off briskly toward town. To the devil with mumbo-jumbo. Save it. He wasn't yet that desperate.

NO CREASE of worry marred the gambler-mask of his face, a face of strong angles and black quizzical brows. The trained restraint was absent from his eyes, though, which took watchful stock of the town as the sky grayed in the east. Picking out the somber bulk of Fannin's Fort, he smiled faintly at a tinge of humor in his thoughts. The Grand Army of the Republic of Texas was about to lose a horse.

"What an army! What a republic!"

He had observed units of that harum-scarum army back in Gonzales and farther east. He was able to form some idea of the personnel of this Goliad garrison. Independent volunteers from the Southern States, soldiers of fortune and filibusters from New Orleans and elsewhere, and a grim backbone of discontented Texas colonists. Their like were still trickling in over the frontiers, hurrying down the plains trails, converging upon scattered points hundreds of miles apart.

They were holding San Antonio de Bexar and Victoria and the old Refugio Mission. They were standing raggedly ready to challenge General Santa Anna and his brigades now marching up from Matamoras to crush the rebellion of this northernmost Mexican province, this wild, isolated, self-styled Republic of Texas.

Amazing, the high percentage of Southern volunteers, some big men among them—Davy Crockett for one. Most of them had never given a thought to Texas till they heard of the rebellion of its United States-born colonists. Well, that was the Southerner for you. Raise a flag and a yell, and he'd come a-running with his gun every time.

Having skirted the town and prowled up behind a wagon close to the rear of the fort, Brother Kit paused. Common sense said that the stables should be here at the rear. His nose corroborated it. The town still slumbered. But some of these Texas rebels had sharp ears and quick ways about them. And there was the problem of sentries. Where were they? There was only that black bulk of the stockade, and silence.

He stepped out from behind the wagon and paced smartly on to the fort. He placed the location of the double gates as he drew near, and hoped they weren't fastened.

From somewhere along the dark stockade came a man's drowsy voice: "What time's it gettin'?"

"Close to five," responded Brother Kit. He reached the gates. They weren't fastened. They swung open to his shove. He walked through without turning his head, and heard the footsteps of the bored sentry go lagging off.

The stable was an enclosed yard with roofed shelters partitioned into stalls, each stall holding a horse, its saddle racked on the crossbar. He made the rounds and his discriminating choice fell upon a deep-chested young

roan gelding. He took down its saddle.

The roan forked its ears in contention. He had to curse it patiently out of the notion of arching its back, and the same cajoling to do to get it to take the bridlebit. At last he backed it out, its hoofs stamping pettishly on the hard-beaten earth.

A voice drawled with exaggerated politeness, "You can tuhn the Mayjah's hoss loose now—*if* it pleases you, suh!"

He spun around, both hands dipping under his coat. Among the three armed and quiet men in the yard, one shifted the aim of his cocked pistol an inch or two and remarked gently, "Ah wouldn't hahdly *do* thet, suh!"

BEFORE the little group of Texan officers in the major's room, Brother Kit put forward his best manner, an easy dignity coupled to a winning frankness. In this his height helped, for he topped them all and stood straighter than most. The morning sun shone on him through the window and they could see that he was a gentleman.

But the major, a heavy-faced man with humorless eyes, bedamned him for an impudent horse-thief and swore he'd have him chained to a gunwheel. "Hoddem you, to a gunwheel, I say! You heah me?"

Brother Kit inclined his high head. "'Deed, I deserve it. My deepest 'pologies to you, suh. Could I've bought a horse, this wouldn't have occuh'd. But when a man's as fired-up as I am to get where the fightin's likely to be—well, liftin' a horse to get there, it doesn't seem like stealin'." He smiled ruefully around at the little group. "As to that, I wager there's not a one among you gentlemen who wouldn't be tempted likewise, did your duty not bind you here."

They looked interested and thoughtful. Even the angry major appeared off-tracked.

But then a pair of young captains of volunteer cavalry strolled in, and at once he knew that he was smashed, impaled on the point of the hazard that had kept him on the alert ever since crossing the Sabine.

They were dark and slender, the Mortier brothers. They were of the quality, gifted with old blood and masculine beauty. Among the New Orleans filibuster crowd they ranked highly as sporting gentlemen-at-arms. Both stopped abruptly at sight of the tall prisoner. Self-control in an instant neutralized their expressions.

Captain Armand Mortier let his right hand slide away from the pistol at his belt. He said pleasantly, "Good morning, gentlemen. Do we have a prisoner of war here?"

"Hardly that," the major disallowed. "He was trying to make off with my horse. Mine! Name's Christopher St. John. An independent volunteer, unattached, we gather."

Armand exchanged a cold smile with his brother, Remi. "Known also as Brother Kit back in New Orleans, where he ran a gambling house in partnership with Sabedeo Velarde—the same Velarde who's now leading a brigade in Santa Anna's army!"

That could have been sufficient. But from Remi came the remark, "He helped Velarde get out of New Orleans and back to Mexico when this war broke out, while some of us were hunting for the fellow. Is he here spying for the Mexicans, you think?"

Brother Kit said nothing. Denial and defense were useless, and he certainly was not going to divulge his real reason for coming to Texas. He searched for an opening, while the major thundered his opinion of a spying renegade, horse thief and lying gambler who dared mock the high cause of Texas by pretending to wish to fight for her.

"Fight for Texas? That scoundrel?" Remi Mortier made a contemptuous gesture. "Texas is nothing to him."

"Wrong," Brother Kit disagreed. He was himself again, eyes coolly wary, lean face calm in its gambler-mask. He gazed at the brothers and said, "To me, Texas is a red-haired lady."

THEIR EXPRESSIONS warned him that he had spoken to the limit. They were bound by their code, which was compounded of lofty chivalry and an exaggerated family pride. Because he was what he was, they took it for granted that he would readily use the weapon of blackguards to strike at them through a lady's reputation. A word or two more from him, and they would shoot and arrogantly reconcile with their code the murder of a disarmed prisoner.

Yet while he detested them he had a tenuous feeling for them. For their likeness to Darienne was very close. One could always pick out a Mortier of New Orleans, the delicate-featured men, tightly slender, graciously condescending and as touchy as unmanageable stallions, and exquisite women with their gorgeous dark auburn hair.

He had thought the Mortier women too poised, too perfect, till he came to know Darienne. As for the men, it gave him keen satisfaction to fleece them. Such gentry, wearing their irritating air of honoring a gambling house by entering it, he made the marks of his special attention. Purposely he and Don Sabe had poured money into their establishment, made it splendid and luxurious, made it fashionable, a gaming salon for ladies and gentlemen, to catch that rich species of game.

Although his experience with women was wide, he nevertheless could not quite rid himself of a slight uneasiness when in the presence of ladies, genuine ladies—and he was able quickly to detect all grades. He had the manners and appearance of a gentleman. He had also the private knowledge that he stood only at the backdoor of gentility, a blackleg cousin to the quality.

But he had not thought of the lovely red-haired girl as a Mortier and a lady when he first saw her. She'd stood in the east parlor and a striking picture she made, for at that moment her poise had been shattered by some grossly salacious remark from a drunken fool of a St. Louis cotton buyer who thought himself in a different kind of place. Her shamed, flaming face was that of any insulted girl, and Brother Kit did the simple and violent thing that was called for.

He sought her out, after the removal of the cotton buyer. She was hurriedly leaving. The men of her party hovered about her, stiffly protective, a little ridiculous. "I—I am obliged to you, sir," she said uncertainly. Her voice was soft.

The warm flush was still upon her and she trembled slightly and seemed very tiny and feminine. She made him feel, of all the men there, the most dominant, the most masculine. He dared to bow deeply over her hand and presented his card, ignoring the upraised brows of her men.

It was not to be their last meeting. He found ways and means. And she appeared rather often among parties dropping in at the gaming salon.

IN THE beginning he enjoyed it as an enticing game, well aware of the risk he ran from the dangerous Mortier men and their clique. She was attracted by him, unwillingly, he guessed, and with little less coquettishness than most girls whom he had pursued with bold advances.

"I wonder," he remarked blandly to her once, "for what unique qualities did your family choose your husband?"

She fell into the trap. "Why do you assume that my family did the choosing?"

"H'm, it seems obvious."

"You go too far, Mr. St. John!"

"My apologies. I take it, then, that Mr. Van der Ek was your own choice?"

She was silent. He smiled down wickedly at her.

He glanced across to where Harald Van der Ek sat with a group at the roulette table, and thought: *Obvious indeed!* That glum, sick Dutchman had surely never captured this lovely

girl unaided. Wealth and background were the requisites demanded by her family. It was said that Van der Ek owned a huge grant of land in Texas, under Mexican patent, and was spending a fortune developing it. But most of the year he had to live in New Orleans supporting a couple of the city's best medical men.

It was at their last meeting, which, like the first, took place in the east parlor, that Brother Kit realized what had happened to him.

She was leaving New Orleans, Darienne told him. "It has become necessary for my husband to start for Texas at once," she said, making a brave play of casualness. "I shall go with him."

"You? To Texas?" He was far from casual. "Why?"

"My husband is not a well man. He needs me." She trembled slightly, as she had that other time, but now her face was pale. "It is my duty—"

"The devil take your duty!"

He went and closed both doors, one leading into the game room where Van der Ek played, the other into the wine room where Remi and Armand Mortier drank and chatted with friends.

He came back to her swiftly and took her hands. "The devil take your duty, Darienne—and Texas and your husband with it!"

"Please—"

He held her and kissed her. "I want you, and you want me. Don't lie. You know it. We'll go somewhere. South America. Or Europe. I've money and I can make more. We'll slip out and disappear, tonight, now! Come on!"

"No! No, Kit, I can't! Oh—"

She broke away from him, gasping, the yielding of her body transformed to panic resistance. She fled from him into the game room. And then he saw that the door to the wine room had opened and Remi and Armand Mortier stood there.

They were inhumanly restrained and correct in manner, their eyes black in the white fury of their faces. Remi said, after shutting the door, "Our sister is leaving New Orleans with her husband, on our order to her and our advice to him. Our task now is with you. We should have attended to it earlier. We have not been blind."

He stared blankly at them, for once slow to comprehend a challenge, and turned away and left the room. He still had the feel of Darienne in his arms, and a sense of intolerable loss.

The Mortiers had friends and many followers. They were openly organizing and outfitting a volunteer company to take to the Texas War. It wasn't expected that the war would amount to anything much more than a few lively frontier skirmishes along the Rio Grande, and a chasing of the enemy down into Mexico, an attractive prospect. Official United States neutrality toward the Texas rebellion in no way discouraged private citizens from adopting the cause and hurrying off to take part in it. Among the New Orleans partisans Brother Kit was already being cursed and condemned as a renegade, he knew, for smuggling Don Sabe aboard a ship back to Mexico.

IT WAS TIME to get out of New Orleans. The Mortiers and their hotheads would doubtless be on the watch for that, but he had been ganged in before and managed to break out—that wild night at Natchez-under-the-hill, for instance, when he and Don Sabe fought off the Lynchers in the burning Marietta Inn.

It had been time to make a jump. And he'd known where he was going....

The angry major reared up. "What? Texas is a *what? A red-haired lady?* What the devil d'you mean by that?"

"It's an expression of speech," Brother Kit murmured, eyes on the Mortier brothers. "I expect these gentlemen could explain its meaning."

He was sure of their reticence. Sooner than have the name of a Mortier lady coupled with his in scandal, they'd shoot him and be damned. Remi observed, "He's merely being faceti-

ous." And Armand put in, "These gamblers and the like, pride themselves on their hardihood. What disposition will be made of him, sir, may I ask?"

"Shooting's too good!" declared the major. "But I s'pose there's got to be a trial and all that foolishness. 'Count of the general, y'know. Dammit, where'll I hold him? All respect to our men, but they take it pretty loose a job like guarding a prisoner."

Remi nodded. "I imagine our New Orleans men wouldn't take it so loosely. Eh, Armand?"

"He wouldn't get away from us, Remi. Not this time. Not alive. I mean, if he attempted escape—" Armand shrugged. He was blunter than his brother. "Major, the name of Van der Ek is not unfamiliar to you. Mr. Van der Ek may be said to be the patron of our New Orleans company, for it was formed largely through his financial help. This fellow is his enemy and may possibly be on his trail. Mr. Van der Ek left here recently with a party to join Travis at San Antonio de Bexar."

The major gave it a moment's thought while meeting their eyes. "The prisoner," he announced, "is placed in your charge."

They saluted, their faces expressionless. "Come," said Remi tonelessly to Brother Kit.

The tiny *santo* rested in his pocket. Here was extremity if ever there was. He, who had never prayed before, touched it and silently prayed now. He was that desperate.

Hum, look, San Juan, lend me a hand here. I'm in a devil of a hobble. Help me out of it and up the river to that Bexar place where the Dutchman's gone, that's all I ask. Nothing wrong with that, is there? The wrong's on the other end—bringing her here to this broncoed country where—uh, well, never mind that. Get me to Bexar and I'll never sin again, s'help me. Hum. Amen.

He knew what was in the minds of the Mortiers. They would take him to the camp of their New Orleans company of volunteer cavalry, give a nod and a look, and... *Ley de fuego,* Don Sabe called it. They were mounted and armed, while he paced ahead, unarmed. They were so sure of him, so sure of themselves, they hadn't troubled to tie his hands. He whirled on them.

He leaped at Remi first. His fingers, strong, supple, trained to crafts of rapid manipulation, got hold of Remi by the knee and belt, and toppled him. He hit Remi hard with his forearm, in the face, above the eyes, and Remi fell toward him. He snatched Remi's holstered pistols, and ducked low with them and took swift aim with one at Armand from under the belly of Remi's dancing horse.

He fired. The pistols were Cochrane pieces, handsomely engraved and carved, true-bored. And at that short range nobody who knew pistols could miss. He saw Armand clap a hand to his neck and sway off balance atop his startled, plunging horse. He threw Remi aside and swung up into the saddle and jabbed his spurless heels into the animal....

BENJAMIN MILAM, fiery old warrior, had stood up and bellowed, "Who'll go with old Ben into Bexar?" And an unorganized rabble charged joyously into San Antonio de Bexar with him and smoked the Mexican General Cos out of Texas.

But now advancing was no less than the massive brigades of General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, His Excellency, President of the Republic of Mexico, Commander-in-chief of the Army of Operations against rebel Texas.

His Excellency moved his brigades ponderously forward. The happy-go-lucky Texan rebels fired on them and scooted to the adobe-walled garrison across the river, that had been a mission and a convent.

They were in high spirits, the Texan fighters. They numbered less than two hundred against three thousand. But they had whipped Cos. With some

hoped-for help from Goliad they would whip Santa Anna. They crossed the fussy little river in careless disorder, all lively except the sick. Even the sick, inspired by joking Jim Bowie on his carried cot, were cheerful.

One who could not conjure up jollity was Colonel Harald Van der Ek, a jaundiced Dutchman with dysentery, hardly able to stand. "I can walk," he protested sullenly.

He made it sound like, "Valk." Even his accent was bad now, as well as his manners. He had stayed in sick privacy in a house in Bexar till the retreat—which wasn't called a retreat by the Texans; it was a forting-in, in the face of vastly superior forces, to await reinforcements from Goliad.

"I can valk," said Harald Van der Ek. And his foot rolled on a sunken pebble and he took a ducking in the river.

"My horse is yours, Colonel. Don't you remember me?" Brother Kit hauled him out of the water. "I had the honor—" he practicaly threw the Dutchman up into the saddle—"to be of slight service to your charming wife, back in New Orleans."

"I remember," muttered Van der Ek dourly. "I remember you."

"Is your wife here, sir?"

"No. I left her at Goliad."

"The devil!" said Brother Kit.

Damn it, she was safe back there in Goliad and he had passed through. Well, then, back to Goliad as soon as this sick man died and this riot was over.

Leading the horse, Van der Ek drooping in the saddle and weakly protesting that he could valk, Brother Kit followed the carefree Texan column over the river and up into the fortified old mission that they called the Alamo....

Brigadier General Sabedeo Velarde hurried from the wrecked chapel where the last of the Alamo defenders had died. But the huge funeral pyre in the yard, soaked with camphine, was now being lighted. In common with other onlooking Mexican officers and men, Don Sabe flinched back from the suddenly immense glare of it.

He looked down at the tiny *santo* in his hand, that he had taken from a Yucatan soldier who obediently described to him the body of its late owner, now somewhere in the sanitary sepulture of the mingled dead. Don Sabe was too sardonic a realist to be sentimental. He wrapped the *santo* in his handkerchief carefully and placed it in his pocket. Then he raised his eyes to the pyre again.

He could surmise—although he was not to know for certain, after defeat—the cause of Brother Kit's trek west to war. He assumed that the trek had much to do with a lovely lady of New Orleans whose husband had been one of the great landowners of Texas. Brother Kit had been all fired-up on that lady. And certainly he wasn't the kind to go traipsing off to trouble that didn't concern him.

The camphine sent up a monstrous pillar of fire to an awesome height, causing some of the peon soldiers to cross themselves. Don Sabe thought of Natchez-under-the-hill, and of other wild times. He wished that his friend had won the red-haired lady and stayed out of Texas. He wished that his friend had been able to enlist the aid of the tiny *santo*, which granted such if the purpose was not sinful....

Gravely and without flourish, Don Sabe saluted the great flame....

GRAVE-SENDING OF THE SONORA KID

(Continued From Page 55)

abruptly. "Oh, but I guess the ranch really belongs to—"

Jeff Randall grinned. "You know, Ellen, I've put a good piece of money away. Always figured to buy a ranch. Now, if I had me a wife—"

"Jeff! Oh, Jeff!" She raised her good arm, drawing his head down to hers. "If you knew how long I've loved you—"

Jeff knew. The knowing was there in the warmth of her kiss, as was the promise of happiness for the both of them for all the years to come.

ENOUGH ROPE

by WM. L. JACKSON

A squatter with the guts to buck grass-greed should never have settled in Wind Valley . . . . .

OLD KIM DOSTER rode swiftly through the midnight darkness of Wind Valley, and he chuckled to himself as he thought how mad Laird McBride would be if the big rancher knew that he was doing work for nester Tom Kenton. McBride would surely hate him if he knew that Kim was even delivering this work, and that Kenton wouldn't have been able to do any plowing without the mended harness.

"But, hang it," Kim thought, "I like Tom Kenton. That's more than I can say for McBride."

He liked the nester mostly because Kenton was the only squatter ever to stay long on McBride's sprawling range. He had especially liked him after Kenton had brought the body of a stranger to town a month ago, after this man had attempted to bushwhack him. McBride had stewed in his own juice then, while publicly swearing that he had never seen this gunman from another range.

Smiling devilishly, Kim topped the last rise two miles from Tom Kenton's cabin, and the smile died on his lips. From the hollow where Kenton's cabin lay a rosy glow reached into the sky. Kim swore and kicked his heels into the sides of his rented horse, knowing that he was seeing all that Kenton had worked on for a year going up in smoke.

What he saw when he was within shouting distance of the burning cabin turned his spine cold. Kenton was not fighting the fire. The nester was visible through the open cabin door, sprawled motionless on the floor.

Kim ran from his horse, shielding his face with his hat as he went into the burning cabin. Three times the heat drove him back before he could drag the nester outside, and when he rolled Kenton over on the ground he saw that he was too late. The front of the nester's shirt was wet and sticky, and Kim knew before he felt for any pulse that the man was dead.

By the light from the burning cabin he examined the ground on all sides, and when he had made a complete circle he swore bitterly. The ground had been carefully dragged, either with burlap or blankets, and there was no way of even knowing how many men had paid this visit.

After a short search he found Kenton's horse and led the spooky animal back to the cabin. He somehow got Kenton's body across the horse's back, and he shook his head in helpless anger as he saw the bruises and marks on the nester's dead face. He mounted and turned the two horses toward town, and a picture of what must have taken place before he arrived built itself in his mind.

No one on this range but Laird McBride could have done this so carefully, and no one but McBride had anything against the nester. McBride could have got into Kenton's cabin by coming to make another offer to buy him out. He could have got in alone, and another man could have crept up to put Kenton under the gun from the cabin window. No thief would have done the things which had been done to Kenton's face, nor any man robbing and fleeing have dragged the yard so carefully.

A CONSUMING rage grew within Kim as he covered the miles to

town, and when he stopped at Sheriff Bob Martin's house, he put his anger into his pounding at the door. The sheriff soon appeared, sleepy-eyed and half dressed, and said, "What in tarnation." Then he saw the inert cargo on Kenton's horse.

Kim gave him his story, quickly and angrily. "You know who did this," he finished. "McBride couldn't get the job done properly, so he did it himself."

"Now, hold on," Sheriff Martin said. "I might agree with you, but that's a strong charge. It takes a lot of proof to back that one up."

"The devil take proof!" Kim began angrily, and stopped, shrugging helplessly. "You're right, it does. But I hope to heaven you can get it." He started to leave the porch, but on the bottom step he turned and added bitterly, "If you don't feel like working too hard on this, take a good look at Kenton's face before you put a blanket over him."

Kim returned his horse to the livery stable and crossed the street to his small boot and saddle shop with sagging shoulders. There was no sound reason for McBride to kill Kenton, he told himself as he pulled his clothes off in his bedroom. The nester's small bite out of McBride's enormous range didn't hurt the big rancher. Kenton had died merely because he had bucked McBride, because he wouldn't run off land which actually belonged to the government anyway.

He thought with anger of the figure McBride liked to think he cut on this range. Not content to live on his ranch, he maintained a sprawling, many-roomed house in town and had his clothes shipped in from eastern tailors. He went in strongly for fancy saddles, large and flashing hand-wrought spurs, and the finest boots that money could buy.

McBride's greatest vanity was displayed by his boots, and Kim knew that he owned at least eighteen or twenty pairs. More than half of them Kim had made himself, hand-shaping them for long hours in his shop. McBride's Mexican boy, Pablo, spent a good part of his time on the back steps of McBride's big house keeping this collection shiny, and McBride often wore three pairs daily.

Kim had an unfinished pair in his shop now. He tossed restlessly in his bed as he realized that McBride had probably worn a pair of boots fashioned by his hands when Kenton was killed. With this bitter thought, he thrust his head into his pillow and tried to sleep.

In the morning his thoughts again turned to McBride, and, though he tried to occupy himself with a dozen different jobs, he found that all day he was really only trying to think of some way to saddle McBride with the guilt which belonged to him. He listened expectantly when Sheriff Martin paid him a visit just before supper, but he was disappointed.

"I went over Kenton's place—what's left of it—with a fine-tooth comb," the sheriff said, "and there's nothing there. McBride's got four of his hands to swear he spent the whole night at his ranch, and he swears himself that he has never even been within shouting distance of Kenton's cabin. I'm sorry, Kim, but I haven't got much to go on."

That evening Kim could find no work to occupy him except the pair of boots he had been making for McBride. He started to work on them with strong distaste, but soon some pleasure, and the almost automatic motions of cutting and shaping kept his hands busy and released his mind.

It was while he worked on one of the boots that the thought of a possible loophole in McBride's makeup came to him, and sudden sureness grew within him until he knew he would take the chance required to prove McBride guilty. The excitement swelled inside him until his hands trembled, and he set the boots down on his workbench. He went to bed, and before sleep would come, his

mind had set and sprung a trap for McBride a dozen times.

EARLY in the morning he rented a horse from the livery stable and left town. After a long and roundabout ride he came into the hollow where the charred remains of Tom Kenton's cabin lay, and he carefully concealed his horse in the woods. He poked around in the blackened ruins for half an hour, and he left the hollow with a piece of the nester's cabin concealed in his saddlebags, returning to town the way he had come, unseen.

He watched the street from his shop window, and when he saw McBride leave town he went quickly to the rancher's big adobe house. He got what he wanted from Pablo by lying and parting with a silver dollar. He returned to his shop, where carefully for an hour with a vise and hammer and a burning candle.

Now he walked up the street to Sheriff Martin's office and talked to the sheriff with quick excitement. When he left he had the lawman's promise, and he knew that Martin had caught some of his excitement, though the sheriff had told him he thought he was crazy. He waited in his shop again until he saw McBride return to town and go into the saloon across the street as he always did after a long ride, and then he went to his doorway and signaled for one of the boys lounging in front of the livery stable.

He flipped the boy a coin and said, "Go the the Golden Lady and tell Laird McBride his new boots need trying on." He watched the boy go in and out of the Golden Lady and his pulse throbbed in his throat. He heard the latch click on his back door, and his breath came easier.

McBride soon came out of the saloon and crossed the street, smiling in anticipation. The big rancher entered the shop and saw the boots on Kim's workbench, not yet half finished. "Are those mine?" he said. "The boy said they were finished."

"I wanted you to see another pair," Kim said. These he pulled from beneath his counter. "This pair, particularly the one with the broken spur."

McBride eyed him speculatively. "Aren't those my boots?" he said.

"Yep," Kim replied. "That's why I thought you might be interested. He closed one hand about the gun beneath his counter, and with the other hand he placed a short length of charred wood on the counter. "That's from the floor of Tom Kenton's cabin," he said. "I almost didn't see that little piece of metal, it's so black from the fire. Seeing as how it's a spur rowel that just fits where that one's busted off your spur here, I thought you might be interested in it. Seems I remember Sheriff Martin saying you told him you'd never even been inside Kenton's place."

Now Kim's heart felt as if it were beating in his throat. This was the moment he feared. He knew he had won only when McBride dropped his glance to the piece of board again.

The big man's voice was heavy with false affability. "Good thing you're not the sheriff," he said, "or you could hang me with this. What price were you considering?"

Kim's shoulder dipped and rose ever so slightly, and the gun from beneath his counter centered on McBride's stomach. "I wouldn't sell it for less than the sight of you hanging," he said.

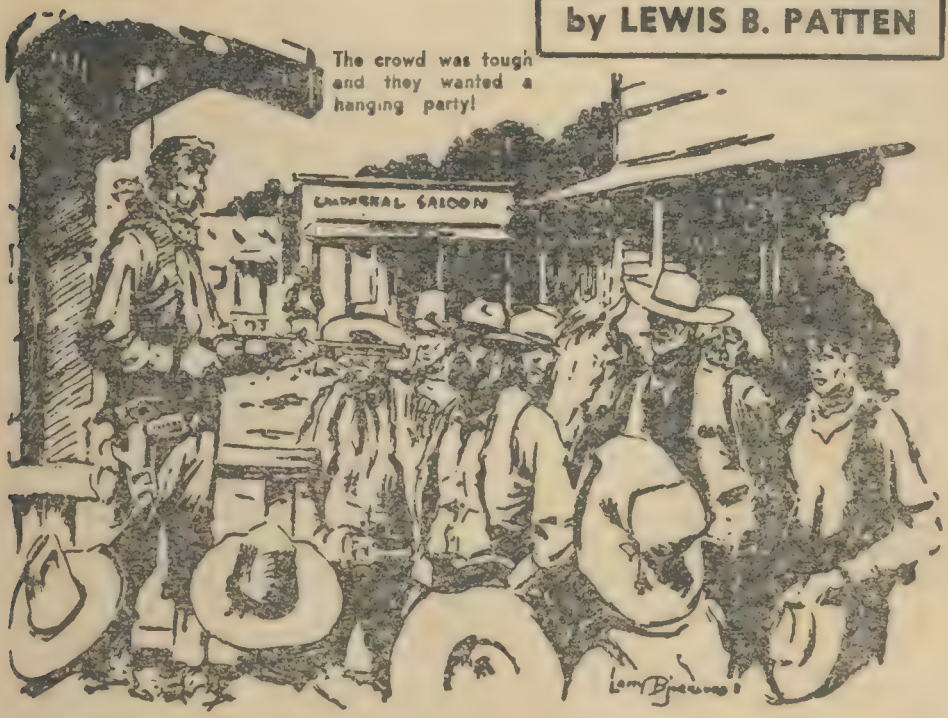
McBride stepped back, fear plain in his eyes, and his hands froze at his sides as the door behind Kim opened and Sheriff Martin stepped into the shop. McBride stood quietly as the sheriff took his gun. Then, he said, "How did you happen to find this thing?"

"I didn't," Kim replied. "I got the boots from Pablo and busted the spur myself. If you'd been less proud and owned just a couple of pairs, you never would have fallen for it. I just picked one of the pairs Pablo said he hadn't shined since last week and—"

"And I couldn't remember which pair I wore that night," McBride groaned....

THE HARD WAY

by LEWIS B. PATTEN



Hard work and fighting was all Sam's Dad had ever known. So it was all he ever taught Sam ....

PROBABLY every kid, sometime or another before he reaches manhood, gets the notion that his folks are against him, and goes to hanging out in the pool halls and saloons with the loafers and the gamblers and the drinkers and the hard-cases. It makes him feel grown up and tough, as he never can around home.

Most of them get over it. For some it comes easy and for some it comes hard. There are some who never get over it. I guess Dad figured I was one of these, but he was wrong. I was simply one that had to learn the hard way.

Dad, being what he was, didn't make it any easier, either. With him, it was toe the mark or else, and never a smile or a pat on the back when I did. .

The town, Last Chance, down where Rustler Creek joins the river, has grown some since you saw it last, I guess. There's more law now and no open fighting, but all the old hard feelings are still alive. There are plenty of new quarrels all the time, too, because the range is overcrowded. It's still the big ranchers against the little ones and I guess it always will be.

I worked pretty hard around the ranch for Dad until my seventeenth birthday. I did chores and rode with the rest of the crew on roundup. In the summer, during haying, I did my share and more. On my birthday a team ran off with me and wrecked a

mower. Dad lit into me and I blew up and headed for town. I got loaded on red-eye and when I got back, Dad and I had another big row.

I got to feeling sorry for myself and slowed down on the work. I took to hanging around town a lot. I figured that if Dad couldn't treat me like a man, then by heaven he wouldn't work me like one. That mower wasn't my fault. It could have happened to anyone.

I got so I liked to play poker and before long I took to packing a gun on my hip that I figured I was pretty good with. It never occurred to me that maybe the bunch in Gallegos' saloon liked me most for my easy way with money, and because Dad had the biggest ranch on Rustler Creek. It never occurred to me that they were just waiting for a chance to use me to get at Dad.

He ain't especially well liked, as you probably know, except maybe by a few of the bigger ranchers. He's got a lot of enemies from the old days. I guess you know better than I do how thick Rustler Creek was with renegade Utes and hardcase whites when Dad settled there on his first 160 acres. He had to be good to stay, but he stayed.

Some of the folks still resent the way Dad homesteaded the valley and had his hired hands file on quarter sections adjoining his and then had them deed their land over to him. It was legal and lots of folks did it, but it's still held against them.

One morning I was sitting in the saloon drinking beer with Lenny Hirons. We were talking about this and that and suddenly Lenny said, "The deer ought to be fat now, Sam. What do you say we go up to your place and get us one?"

It was late in May and I ought to have been up home helping to gather cattle out of the brush, but I'd been getting trashier ever since the summer before when Dad and I had our falling out, and he had kind of quit bothering me to work much. Lenny's idea sounded good because the weather was nice and I kind of felt like a ride.

Of course, Colorado has passed game laws since you left and they appointed Joe Vincent the warden for the country around Last Chance, but nobody paid much attention either to the game laws or to Joe. Everybody was too used to getting deer and elk whenever they wanted it, to give it up just because the legislature over in Denver passed some laws.

Lenny went home to get his gun and I stayed in the saloon. When he came back he had Nick Fantry with him.

Lenny's a shriveled little guy. Maybe you remember him. He had a stiff shoulder from an old gunshot wound he wouldn't talk about, and that seemed funny because Lenny would talk about most anything and liked to brag. He never worked and he was drunk most of the time. But when he was sober, he seemed like a pretty nice guy and he was specially nice to me. His hair, what was left of it, was gray. He had a habit of raising one eyebrow when he looked at you, and you could never tell what he was thinking.

Nick's about the opposite. He's big —not much older than me. I admired Nick for one thing. He never let the old grudge his father had for mine influence the way him and me got along. That shows you how big a fool I was —thinking that.

We mounted up and rode out of town, taking the winding road up Rustler Creek. It wasn't long until we came to Dad's fenceline and we went on in toward the house so I cou'd get my new Winchester.

Lenny and Nick hung back by the gate and called to me, "We'll wait for you."

Dad was standing by the corral as I came in, looking at me sourly, kind of disgustedly. He asked, "Who's that you got with you?"

I'd always been kind of afraid of Dad, but I wouldn't admit it, even to myself. He's tough as they come and harsh and hard. He's bitter, too. He keeps the bitterness bottled up inside him and won't let himself relax like other men do. Hard work and fight-

ing is all he has ever known, I guess.

Being afraid of him and worse scared he would find it out, had kind of made me defiant and hard too. Anyway, everytime we faced each other we must've looked like a couple of stray dogs squaring off for a ruckus.

This particular morning I gave the hard look he was giving me right back to him and said, "Lenny and Nick," and I have an idea I had just as well have finished out the sentence which would have gone, "And what damn business is it of yours?" but I didn't.

He started to say something and he got a worried look on his face for a minute. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned away. He'd fought me for a whole year trying to make me see things the way he did, and I guess he finally gave it up as a bad job. But before the day was over, I was wishing more than anything else in the world that he had tried once more.

I got my gun, which was one of the new .30-30 Winchester carbines, and went back to Lenny and Nick, and we rode out on the bench behind the house.

I noticed Lenny and Nick whispering to each other a couple of times and wondered what they were talking about, but I didn't say anything.

WE HADN'T gone very far when a big buck jumped up and I nailed him through the neck. He dropped and we rode over and got down, leaning our guns against a clump of brush. I went over and cut the buck's throat. Then, while he bled, we sat down and rolled a smoke and talked.

The sun was hot on my back and felt good. It seemed to me that Lenny and Nick was awful nervous and they kept looking around as if they expected somebody. I remember laughing at them and saying, "Don't worry. There ain't no game wardens within fifty miles except Joe, and he won't bother us."

I guess we'd been there about thirty minutes when I heard a crashing in the brush below us, the sound a horseman will make coming through. I just sat still. This was Dad's land and I figured it was one of the hands. Lenny, though, still acted nervous—even more so than before. He jumped up and snatched a gun from the brush clump and pumped a cartridge into it.

It was my gun he grabbed. Just then a rider came busting out into the little clearing we were in. It was Joe. His game warden's badge was pinned to his shirt, but otherwise he was dressed like any puncher.

He said, "You boys are under arrest. Killin' game out of season."

I started to grin. It didn't mean nothing to me, only maybe a fine which Dad would pay without too much hollering. Something kept bothering me, though. This all seemed a little too pat, and I remembered Lenny and Nick's nervousness which was sure a lot worse now. Lenny's face had gone pale and his eyes had narrowed and he'd lost that lift in his eyebrow, something I'd never seen him do before. He was holding my gun so's the muzzle pointed at Joe.

Joe said, "Put that gun down, Lenny. You know I got to do my job. I was tipped off you guys were hunting this morning."

I looked over at Lenny, thinking, "So that was it?" and felt like laughing until I saw Lenny's finger tightening on the trigger. I yelled and went for him, but it was too late. The rifle barked and the bullet took Joe in the chest. He grunted and went down.

Even telling it now, I can still feel the way it all seemed so unreal. There was Joe, laying on the ground, dead. His horse stampeded back to the road, and we could hear him crashing through the brush, dragging the reins. Otherwise, it was pretty quiet and the sun didn't seem hot any more. I was shivering.

My voice didn't sound very natural. I said, "Why in hell did you do that?"

Lenny laughed, about as nasty a laugh as I ever hope to hear. "Why did I do that?" he sneered. "I didn't

do nothin'. You did it and me and Nick will swear to that." He tossed the rifle at my feet and went and got his horse. When he got him he led him close to where I was and stopped about two feet from me. He pointed to his shoulder, the stiff one. He said, "You see that? Your dad did that to me. Your dad did that and then had me sent down to Canyon City for five years. This is just the first payment on what I owe him for that."

I guess I should have killed him then, but I was too shaky and scared. He and Nick mounted up and left. First, I thought of high-tailing it down home and spilling the whole story to Dad. Then I knew I couldn't do that. He'd be the last one in the world to understand.

I suddenly wished he was different or I was or something, because a kid ought to be able to go to his father when something happens. Well, I got panicky. I caught my horse and rode like all get-out for Center City, thirty miles away. I tied the horse to the rail in front of the saloon there and went in and bought a bottle. I kept trying to think of a way out, but I couldn't. Pretty soon I was so lit I couldn't think at all.

It was dark when the sheriff came in. He came right to me and he was carrying my Winchester. He asked, "This yours, Sam?"

I nodded. There wasn't no use in lying. He said, "Come along, Sam," and I got up and went with him. When we got to the jail in Last Chance, he started asking me a lot of questions, but I wouldn't answer them. At last he left me and I fell on the bunk and passed out.

I was pretty sick when I woke up in the morning and on top of that it was Dad that woke me. He handed me a cup of coffee and gave me time to drink it and roll a smoke before he said anything. Then all he said was, "You do it, Sam?"

I looked around at him. I looked square into his eyes. I said, "No," and kept right on looking at him. He acted like he doubted me for a minute and then he looked surprised. He said, "I'll be hanged if I don't believe you!"

We didn't say anything more until I'd finished my smoke. Then he said, "Lenny Hirons and Nick Fantry say you did. It's your gun he was killed with. You got a bad reputation. I ain't popular around Last Chance. Joe Vincent was pretty well liked. You see what that all adds up to?"

I nodded and he got up. He said, "I'm leaving some money with the jailer so's you'll get pretty good meals," and went out.

I FELT MIGHTY low. I figured Dad had quit me. I guessed I couldn't blame him too much. I felt sorry for myself all day. All the friends I had was turned against me. Cripes, they'd never been friends at all. I could see that now.

The next morning I noticed there was two jailers instead of one, both of them packing forty-fives which was unusual. I asked the sheriff what all the precautions was about. I figured Dad was going to break me out.

The sheriff said, "The folks in this town liked Joe Vincent. He never hurt no one in his whole life, which is something I can't say for your outfit. There's some talk about stringin' you up. I'll try not to let 'em, but I ain't going to kill nobody to save your stinkin' hide."

He moved me over into another cell, which he maybe figured was safer. It opened onto his office, and every time the door was opened, I could see into the street. What I saw turned me cold all over. There was a crowd gathering. They were yelling and they carried long logs to use as battering rams. I heard Lenny yelling, "If we let him go to trial, his old man will get him off! He killed Joe! I seen him do it! String him up!"

They milled around in the street for about an hour, yelling louder all the time.

Finally they battered the door in. The sheriff put a couple of shots into the ceiling and then gave up. They unlocked my cell and took me over

across the street in front of Doc Masters' house where there's a big cottonwood.

They were handling me pretty rough. My mouth was smashed and swollen and my nose was bloodied and they beat my eyes 'till I could hardly see.

THEY WERE hoisting me up into the saddle when the door to Doc's house opened and out stalked Joe Vincent. He was naked to the waist and there was bandages wrapped around his chest, but he was wearing the same battered hat he had on that day and the same pants and chaps.

I stared. Lenny yelled, "It's a trick. I seen Joe buried myself. Well, I seen the coffin anyway."

Joe looked at Lenny and pointed. He croaked, "He did it. Sam didn't."

Lenny turned green and sprinted for his horse. The boys caught him all right and he babbled, "I didn't mean to shoot him! I swear to hell I didn't mean to!" Then he got a crafty look on his face and howled, "Anyway, Joe ain't dead!"

Joe turned around and walked back into Doc's house. The mob broke up, but the sheriff took Lenny to the jail anyway. He told me as he was leaving, "There's somethin' stinkin' about this whole business an' I'm goin' to find out what it is. You got a fine to pay, Sam, an' you're a material witness. Don't you try leavin' the country!"

I went over to Doc's house and knocked on the door. Dad was standing there in the parlor putting on his shirt. For just a second he looked like Joe Vincent and then I saw all that funny looking sticky stuff on his face. There was a bunch of old bandages lying on the floor and there was a funny looking little guy with long hair and wearing a black suit putting some stuff in a suitcase.

Like nothing had happened at all, Dad said, "Son, this is Monsewer Rain," and the little guy broke in and said irritably, "M'sieu Rene," correcting him. Dad went on, "Monsewer Rain is an actor over to the Tabor Oprey house in Denver, an' knows how to make folks look like other folks with stuff he puts on their faces. He balked at comin' over an' he balked at lookin' in that grave at Joe's body, but he did, didn't you, Monsewer?"

Dad grinned a little and I knew the Monsewer had come only because there was a gun in his ribs. Dad went on, "I didn't figure on them tryin' to lynch you, Sam. I thought I'd just catch Lenny drunk n' mebby the scare would work."

Dad handed the Monsewer a big roll of bills and said, "You saved Sam's life an' maybe that makes you feel better about bein' forced to come. Maybe this money'll pay you for your time."

As Dad went out toward the kitchen, the little guy grunted to Doc in a funny sounding voice, "Eef he had stepped ten feet closer to that mob, M'sieu, he would have been hanged too. Thees makeup only works at a distance."

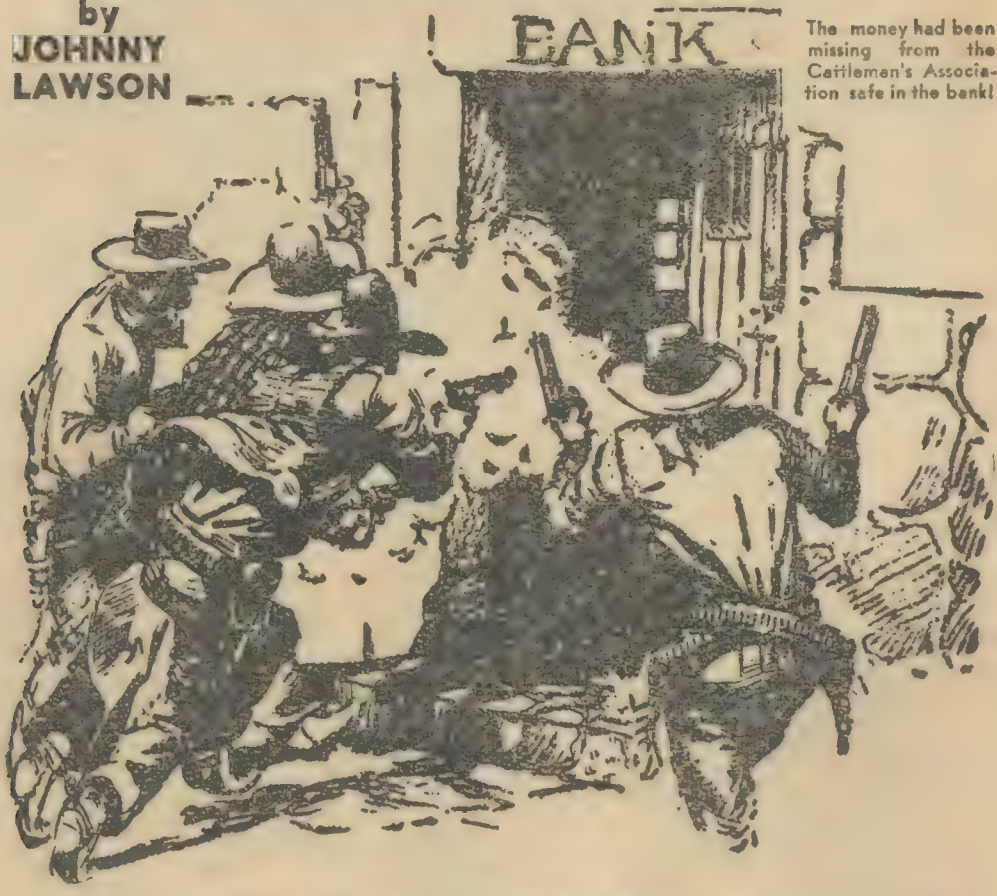
Well, that's the story, Mother. I had a heck of a time finding you. I went through some of Dad's old letters when he wasn't there and found your address that way. I know you left Dad because he was so high handed and hard, but I read some of the letters too and I know you love him.

He's high handed all right. If he wasn't, I wouldn't be here. But he ain't hard. I found that out on the ride home from town that night. He's just had to make folks think he's hard all his life to get along. He's lonely too. I wish you'd come on back with me.

What did he say to me on the way home? Well, I told him I was sorry for all the trouble I'd caused him and he said, "Hell, it ain't your fault, Sam. It's mine. If I'd been the kind of father I should, you wouldn't have had to look in the saloon for your friends."

SIXGUN SAINT

by JOHNNY LAWSON



The money had been missing from the Cattlemen's Association safe in the bank!

The ranny didn't look like a killer to Jake. He looked too worried, and the ribs were showing on his horse . . . . .

JAKE DORRANCE was, from the cradle, a friendly kid. Even a gentle kid. It could have been said to be almost a lack in him. A youngster of ten was normally a pretty rambunctious creature; consideration of the other fellow was a concept completely outside his grasp.

One day, for example, Harg Deal found Billy Morrison in town and he gave him a brutal pistol-whipping, right there on the street. Jake had just come out of the emporium and he stood and watched the beating. Others stood and watched it too. Nobody showed any sign of wanting to interfere. It was taken for granted on Pony range that Billy Morrison was no good. He'd actually been caught cattle-stealing only once, but he had to eat something, and everybody knew he never put in an honest day's work, so it was taken for granted that when a cow or horse was missing, Billy Morrison had slow-elked it, and now and again the sheriff would throw Billy in the hoosegow for a day and now and again somebody would thrash the daylights out of him.

Billy Morrison must not have been

more than thirty, but he had a face that was wrinkled up like a man's of eighty. He never spoke up much any more in his own defense. And he took his punishment without expression, unless perhaps he squinted a few new lines and cracks into his sun-baked skin.

He showed no emotion when Jake Dorrance came over and put long fingers under his armpits and shoved him up from behind onto his feet. And he simply accepted the battered stetson that Jake picked out of the dust and batted off and handed to him, and tugged it onto his bald head.

"Ought to wash that crease on your cheek," Jake said.

Runs of blood hung, partially stanched by dust, from a ragged slash that went straight across Bill Morrison's long-since broken nose.

Billy Morrison still didn't speak. He kept his watery-blue eyes on Jake Dorrance. Maybe he didn't know what to say to a ten-year-old kid in a situation like this. Maybe he wouldn't have known what to say to anybody who'd acted like this toward him.

"Over at the restaurant, you could do it," Jake said.

He took Billy Morrison by the arm and led him over there, like he would have a blind man. Jake was a full inch taller than Billy; he was a lanky kid, and Billy Morrison was bowed in the legs and in the shoulders.

"Keep—him—out—of—here!" The the voice of the proprietor of the eat-shack lashed menacingly at them as Jake held the screen door open.

"Or at the livery," Jake said, closing the screen door again and steering Billy Morrison back across the street.

Dal Jones stood on the boardwalk in front of the hostelry, where he'd just hung a feed-bag on his roan. Dal was a dark, good-looking fellow in his late twenties, and he owned the bi-weekly newspaper, and he owned several sizeable spreads that he'd acquired by what were generally termed shrewd but honest deals, and he'd been asked to run for major the next election.

Dal Jones said to Jake Dorrance, "You'd better steer clear of that one, lad."

"Mr. Morrison has a bad cut on his face that needs washing Mr. Jones," Jake replied.

"Let him take care of his own troubles. He can take care of himself."

Jake called to the grizzled liveryman, who was crouched at shoeing a horse back in the shadows, "Want to use your water pail a minute, Mr. Selby!"

The hosteler grunted glancing up, but as he returned to his work, whom his rheumy old eyes had seen suddenly dawned on him.

"Oh no you don't!" he said, getting busily to his feet. "Oh no you don't." He hitched forward with unwonted speed, grabbing a crossbar from one of the stalls.

AND THEN there was the time, two years later, when riding range cutting out market beef for his Uncle Jacob, for whom he'd been named and who had brought him up after, at the age of two, both his mother and dad had died in a fever scourge—when Jake helped the bank robber escape.

"He looked like an all-right fellow to me," Jake explained to the sheriff afterwards.

"He looked like an all-right fellow to you," the lawman mocked. "You didn't happen to wonder how-come he had a bullet hole in him, or where he got those bags with the dollar signs on them, slung across his saddle."

"I don't think he had any such bags slung across his saddle, Sheriff Peabody."

"You don't, eh. Well I can tell you without having been there, that he did."

"Is that so. All I was interested in I guess was getting the blood stopped that was flowing from that hole in his hip."

"So you dragged him over to the

stream, and brought him to with that nice, cool water, and you bandaged that bullet hole all nice by tearing your shirt into strips, and before you say Jack Robinson you had him back on his horse again and feeling fit enough to ride all the way across the border with those stolen money bags."

"Yes, I found his horse munching buckbrush near where I came across him."

"Uh-huh. Well, fine. In other words, you handed three thousand dollars of the bank's money to a murdering outlaw. How old were you again, son?"

"Twelve. But I don't think he'd ever murdered anybody, Sheriff Peabody. He didn't look to me like a man who would hurt anybody. And perhaps he needed the money more than the bank did, Sheriff Peabody. He had a very worried look, and his outfit was very shabby. And the ribs were showing on his horse. His horse must have been very hungry, or he'd never have eaten buckbrush."

The sheriff raised a shaggy eyebrow at Jake's Uncle Jacob, who had brought the boy into town when Jake had told of his finding the outlaw that the whole range was searching for.

"You're going to have to learn this youngster of yours the facts of life one of these days," the lawman said grimly to Uncle Jacob.

THE "FACTS of life," however, failed, as the years went by, to penetrate to Jake Dorrance. That open, honest, almost saintly look grew only the more assured on his lean, homely face, and neither words nor experience seemed to crack Jake's conviction that the way you developed a decent world was to be kind and gentle with everybody, regardless of the balance of good and evil in them.

How can you tell who is good and who is evil? Jake's comportment seemed to ask. And replied: *So the safest thing to do is be friendly and helpful to everybody.*

A good many people, over the years, took note of this about Jake Dorrance, and certain interested parties—of good will—attempted to snap Jake out of it, to bring him face to face with the fact that, no matter how pretty its trimmings here and there, life was still essentially a dog-eat-dog, jungle-rule proposition. And certainly this was emphatically so along the raw frontiers of the New West.

Eventually—inevitably many had claimed—a denizen of anything but good will observed the beatitude of the youngster. Jake Dorrance was eighteen when he told his Uncle Jacob that a cowpuncher was what he felt he was cut out to be. Old Jacob snorted. With his respected position in the community—he was one of the half-dozen largest ranchers—he could have done his nephew a great deal of good materially. Jake, with only a little drive on his own part, could, with his kin's influence and help, have moved up fast on Pony range to a position of power and well-being.

"I reckon I'm cut out to be a cow-nurse," Jake rejoined with a smile after one of Uncle Jacob's increasingly irate expositions. "So if you can't use me in that capacity around the Leaning J, maybe I ought to set out on my own. It's time I was doing that anyway."

Uncle Jacob nodded slowly, containing himself with difficulty.

"I educate him, I make him an expert with gun and horse, I show him the inside workings of big beef operating, I offer to build him up in my shoes. And now he wants me to put him out in the hills with the forty-a-month grub-liners."

So Jake rode out with a thin saddlepack, promising to pay back his uncle for the animal he forked, as soon as possible.

"Well, make sure you don't forget," were Uncle Jacob's bitter, sardonic last words.

And Jake went to work for a man new to this section, Stark Stiles. Stiles was a big man with little eyes. He'd

looked over Pony range a considerable time before he bought onto it. He kept his eyes, however confined naturally, open, and he kept his ears open too, and it was shortly after he had staked a small wedge in Pony country, that Jake approached him for a job.

Stark Stiles knew all about all of Pony's biggest cattlemen. He knew about old Jacob Dorrance's "loco" nephew. Stark Stiles stood with his shoulders in that hunched, hard-breathing way he had, probing young Jake with his colorless pinpoint eyes.

"Okay," he growled, "see what you can do with the stuff out behind the hill there."

Jake Dorrance did a neat job of calf branding. Stiles didn't say anything. He stood around and watched Jake in that puffed-lip way he had.

ONE EVENING he did finally speak to Jake. He laid a limp quirly on his pendant underlip and pulled a match up his trousers and cupped it to the cigarette and said,

"Maybe you'd want to come in the office awhile."

Jake smiled, "Sure, Mr. Stiles."

Inside, Stark Stiles put what he intended to be a smile on his face.

"Got to get some money somewheres," he grunted abruptly.

"Why—what's the trouble, Mr. Stiles?"

He flicked his pig eyes at Jake, his smile embarrassed now.

"My brother. He's crippled, and half blind, can't make a livin'. Has this chance to sell five thousand head of cattle to the Army for thirty dollars a head."

Jake frowned. "So what is—"

"Could pick up the herd for five dollars a head and clear enough to keep him the rest of his life—if he could jest borrow that twenty-five thousand for a couple days."

"Twenty-five thousand," Jake repeated.

Stiles humphed with helpless amiability. "It's a lot of money."

"For only *two days* he'd need it?"

"That's right." He shook his head. "It's too bad, ain't it."

"You mean he could pay it back in two days."

"That's right."

After a pause, Jake said, "There ought to be some way to arrange it."

"Ain't many men," Stiles said slowly, "can lay their hands on that kind of money. Banks'll only loan it to them that don't need it in the first place."

"Maybe I could get hold of—twenty-five thousand dollars—Mr. Stiles. You're sure he'd pay it back in two days?"

Stark Stiles shifted his position, as a man will in order to better conceal emotions that he's afraid will boil to the surface. He leaned into his roll-top desk, rummaged there as though looking for something.

"Oh sure he would, sure he would."

When Stark Stiles turned back he was lighting another cigarette. Jake not having said anything further, Stiles could not resist lifting the focus of his tight little eyes to Jake's face.

Jake had taken a straight-backed chair that Stiles had set out for him. Jake sat on the edge of it now, looking first down at the floor, then out the window.

"You're certain you could trust him, Mr. Stiles—oh sure you are, him being your brother. Well—let's—see—"

"Oh sure. Sure, he's my brother after all. Who you going to trust if you can't trust your brother—"

DAL JONES was the one who got on to who the author of the note was. Word had spread like a wind-blown forest fire, after the money had been found missing, shortly before noon, from the Cattlemen's Association safe in the bank, and Dal had been among the first to storm into town.

"It's that blamed kid," he said.

In the near riot that was sweeping the bank premises, Dal Jones' words could hardly be heard, but somehow they fell into a lull, and somehow the

strength and intensity and intelligence that impregnated Dal's every gesture, gave even his quietest utterance a kind of magnetic carry—so that heads turned as sharply in his direction as if he had triggered his gun in the narrow confines of the small building.

Dal stood spread-legged in front of the small, thick-walled safe, still studying the unsigned note that the teller had found inside it less than an hour before. Then his hard, dark-brown eyes were suddenly scanning the room and picking out the sheriff from its chaos, and with a stride he had the lawman by the arm.

"Hold everything till I get back. Put the clamp on everybody, hard. I'll get this money back in a hurry."

"What kid?" one of the cattlemen growled suspiciously.

"What the devil have you got, Jones?" another one challenged.

Dal shoved these aside and others, gaining the street. The sheriff took a squared-off stance in the doorway, and Dal heard him beginning a shouted announcement as Dal heard him beginning a shouted announcement as Dal steel-jabbed his palomino into motion.

"Only that crazy kid could have thought up that damned thing," Dal growled under his breath. All the drive, all the ruthless vigor, all the fury deep in the man, went now into the wild, slashing ride he thrust directly across country to the Stiles' place....

This could have been said to be the occasion of Jake Dorrance's growing up. Before now, Jake had lived by his own rather exaggerated golden rule, unconsciously, instinctively. This was the first time Jake thought about his actions, and their meaning, and their value, and their purpose....

Jake stood hatless in the baking midday sun, his sandy-red hair a tangled, unattended jungle between the big ears. He had just stepped down from his horse in the Stiles ranchyard. After having delivered the twenty-five thousand dollars to the spot where Stark Stiles had gone to tell his brother to pick it up. After having taken the key from the secret hook in Uncle Jacob's tool shed, that opened the back door to the bank; and having opened the Association safe with the combination he'd so often seen his uncle use as treasurer of the cowmen combine.

And it was while riding back from delivering the money that Jake suddenly remembered a thing Stark Stiles had said—and it was this that started him thinking.

"To *the Army,*" Stiles had said the incapacitated brother could sell the five thousand head of cattle. "For *thirty dollars a head.*"

And how many times had Jake heard his Uncle say, now that he thought about it, that he'd never sell to the Army because top money for them was fifteen dollars....

JAKE MOVED into the bunkshack, where he and the other two hands, now out on range, put up. A furrow, for perhaps the first time in his life, formed vertically between Jake's eyes.

So maybe you couldn't just do unto everybody as you'd like them to do to you. Evidently there were places, even with the golden rule, where you had to draw the line—

Jake went and withdrew the clean-oiled .45 from under his pillow, from its holster. This was the gun with which Uncle Jacob had taught him, both accuracy and swift draw. He had accepted the instruction without interest, but, perhaps because in not caring he was completely relaxed, he was an apt pupil; he had shown almost uncanny skill.

—But if you had, arbitrarily, on your own judgement, to draw the line under certain conditions, what good was the golden rule? Each man, then, could draw his own lines, according to his own lights....

Jake belted on the holster. Flipped the gun, in a delicate, blurred motion, taking the butt with his long fingers on the third turn. And in that moment

he heard the hoofbeats and scuffing of a hard-ridden horse being hard reined in, and he dropped the weapon into leather.

Jake went out and saw Dal Jones coming off the veranda of the house in a single furious stride. And when Dal saw Jake, he sprinted to him as though Jake might go up in smoke before he could reach him. He took most of Jake's shirtfront in a rocky fist and he set his iron jaw and he barely opened his lips speaking.

"Where is the money, kid. Talk. Fast."

"A man who needs it very badly has borrowed it for—"

"Where is the money, kid."

Jake shook his head.

"I can't reveal that until it is returned, the day after—"

Jake felt the rock twist sharper against his chest, heard the fabric of his shirt rip.

"Who the hell is this 'crippled blind man' you refer to in the note, that you 'borrowed' the money for. Talk, kid, I'm telling you, talk."

"I say I can't reveal that at this—"

Dal Jones released Jake long enough to slam the back of the same hand hard across Jake's nose.

"Talk, kid. Because I'll beat it out of you if you don't."

Jake slowly wiped away the tears that had been knocked out of his eyes, and were blinding blobs before his vision. And when Dal Jones released him again and poised his hand to crash his knuckles across Jake's eyes again, the .45 suddenly appeared in Jake's right hand, the muzzle lined on Dal Jones' belly.

"You'd better not hit me again, Mr. Jones."

Jones paused, but only long enough to lower the aim of his hand, sweeping it down now with the palm turned out, with the intention of batting the gun out of Jake's hand. But Jake stepped back nimbly, so that Jones' blow missed its mark.

The frustrated fury boiling in the man exploded now. He reached wildly for his own gun, his feet going apart automatically into showdown stance.

This effort was doomed too, however, for Jake shot the weapon out of Dal Jones' hand just as Dal's fingertips lifted it clear. And almost in the same motion, Jake flipped his gun half over to make of the butt a club, with which he neatly clipped Jones' cranium, so that the man was going stunned to his knees even as he was losing his cutter.

"If this is the state you've worked yourself into, then probably everybody else is in a bad mood too," Jake said to Dal Jones' unhearing ears, "and what I'd better do is hide out until the money is returned."

Jake backed carefully away from Jones' prone form, as though not to disturb the delicate arrangement of things as he now had them set in his mind.

He got the claybank and strapped a roll onto it and put it onto the trail he'd just covered.

AT A SHORT distance from the clump of boulders where he'd left the money—"those big ones directly north of the Township Mesa," was the mutually well-known spot Jake had agreed on with Stiles—Jake dismounted and ground-hitched the horse in a bullberry patch.

He went quickly Indian-fashion to the boulders.

And crouched, in a fully concealed spot, between two of them. Where he could watch the money, the newspaper-wrapped bundle of which was still where he'd left it an hour and a half before.

Stark Stiles' brother should arrive at any moment now.

When Jake heard the hoofbeats, he said half aloud, "It will be Stiles—not his brother."

It was.

Frowning, from the bitterly exact confirmation of his analysis, Jake looked at the greed, the nervous greed, that glittered out of Stark Stiles' eyes, going ahead of him like a living thing,

probing among the boulders for the package of money even before the man had ridden close enough to give this point.

Stark Stiles was reaching a big, dirty-nailed, avarice-trembled hand for the twenty-five thousand dollars in its incongruous wrapper, when Jake Dorrance used his gun as a club for the second time. He came out soundlessly behind Stiles just as Stiles was stooping, so that the blow clipped across the back of the man's head, in effect simply helping him to complete the downward arc he'd begun.

Without as much as a grunt, Stark Stiles' big body found itself a place among the boulders and relaxed, unconscious. A gila monster appeared briefly and looked at the great body; apparently discovered nothing of interest about it, and went its way.

His underlip bitter between his large, white teeth, Jake strapped the money bundle to the cantle with his saddle roll. He aimed the horse for the pine skirt that encircled Marshal's Mountain, to the north, first carefully crossing a stretch of lava rock on which hoofprints wouldn't show. He rode up into the forest, using no trail, simply keeping the claybank headed up, and letting it select its own through-ways.

Well up, he chose the spot for his cold camp; here, without a betraying fire, he would wait until dark tomorrow.

He hunkered by the spring that had settled him on this location. He listened to its gentle music. He breathed deeply of the cool, pine-scented breeze. Here, he thought, there was sense. Here, away from the intrigues of men, was simplicity: you absorbed the great quiet and the gentle music and the beauty and the washed air, and the world made sense.

Jake's eye flickered guiltily to the package of money; he could just barely see it through the tight evergreen, where the trunk-tied claybank had wandered grass-bent; it seemed somehow blasphemous to bring such sordidity to this sanctum.

This simplicity, this mystical purity, was what men, Jake thought, *were so sorely in need of.* And the thought confirmed and strenghtened more than ever his resolution to carry out his plan to the end. For probably before genuine faith and good will and justice were possible in men, the semblance of it, the illusion of it, must first be believed in....

IT WAS two weeks later that they opened the Association safe for the first time since the twenty-five thousand had been found missing from it. The safe had been emptied, its remaining contents transferred to the big bank vault, and forgotten. It was only when they decided to get rid of the safe, which no longer had any value as a strongbox with the missing bank robber Jake Dorrance knowing its combination, that the teller opened it for one last glance to make sure nothing had been left in it. The lock on the back door of the bank had been changed during the first week, since young Dorrance must still have that key with him, and disposal of the safe completed the bank's invulnerability to new assaults by the amazing kid.

They combed the country for Jake Dorrance during those two weeks. Dal Jones went sleepless for sixty-eight hours, leading out posse after posse. Dal had shouted the warning that the kid had not only a daring imagination but an uncannily fast gun hand, to go heavily armed, when searching for him, at all times.

"I teach him to be good with a gun," old Jacob Dorrance muttered to himself bitterly, standing inconsolable in the shadowed middle of his big house, staring unseeing out a window, opening and closing his great hands as though he wished they were mauling his notorious nephew.

And Stark Stiles joined two of the sheriff's forays, to make sure that nobody got any notions growing out of his having hired the kid. *But what in*

the hell was the son's idea, Stiles kept wondering. *If he wanted to swipe that money, how come he did it this complicated way, how come he hadn't just hauled it off on his own?*

Nobody thought to take the note seriously, was why nobody had looked in the safe before. Not after Dal Jones roared into town with his story of the kid out-shooting him, out-slugging him, and disappearing without a trace....

"Cripes O'Molly!" was all the teller could articulate staring, as at a ghost, into the safe. He had a high, screechy voice, and wild emotion quickly choked it off.

The twenty-five thousand dollars sat in neat stacks on the center half-shelf of the safe.

The teller put a white, bony finger to it, like you pinch somebody to make sure it's really he.

The bank president waddled out of his office and had his turn gaping. People came in off the street. Word whisked along the street and the sheriff came running, with, for no particular reason, his gun out....

And for a long time nobody passed judgement on young Jake Dorrance.

Bank-robbing was a bad thing, it could never be condoned. Yet here a crippled, half-blind man had needed money, a great deal of money, an amount that no bank would ever begin to consider loaning an old broken-down cripple—and Jake Dorrance had taken it from the bank and loaned it to the crippled man and returned it to the bank as promised.

It made a lot of people on Pony range do a lot of thinking, somehow.

And old Jacob Dorrance got a kind of new light in his eye. Of pride, probably more than anything. He even, once, wondered if he'd ever see his nephew again; the boy would probably never ride this way....

The only one who knew the truth, of course, was Stark Stiles, and he of course wasn't telling. Stiles walked around in a kind of a daze for weeks after the incident. And he never cut in very far onto Pony range after that; somehow seemed completely busted by it. He finally sold out and moved on....

THE HELLIONS

(Continued From Page 36)

blamed for the job," the tall cowboy said. "You didn't find any of the money on them, did you, Herman... Let's be riding, sheriff. We still have to find the real culprits."

"'Lame-brains', he calls us," Link said huffily to Marty.

WHICH COULD very properly have been called the Final Chapter in the Adventures of Marty Johnson and Link Barr, Young Bandits. Because at a town some fifty miles north, the eye of both of them was caught by a notice on a courthouse bulletin board, advertising for cowhands.

And without commenting on it, and while still keeping up the huffy talk they'd been making on their undignified and unjust treatment, ever since the sheriff had lifted the hangnooses off their necks and booted their posteriors and told them to start walking and never show their faces in that part of the country again—yes, quite automatically they had set out for the ranch that needed help.

"'Lame-brains', he has the gall to call us," Link was muttering for the hundredth time. "Who did he think *he* was anyway?"

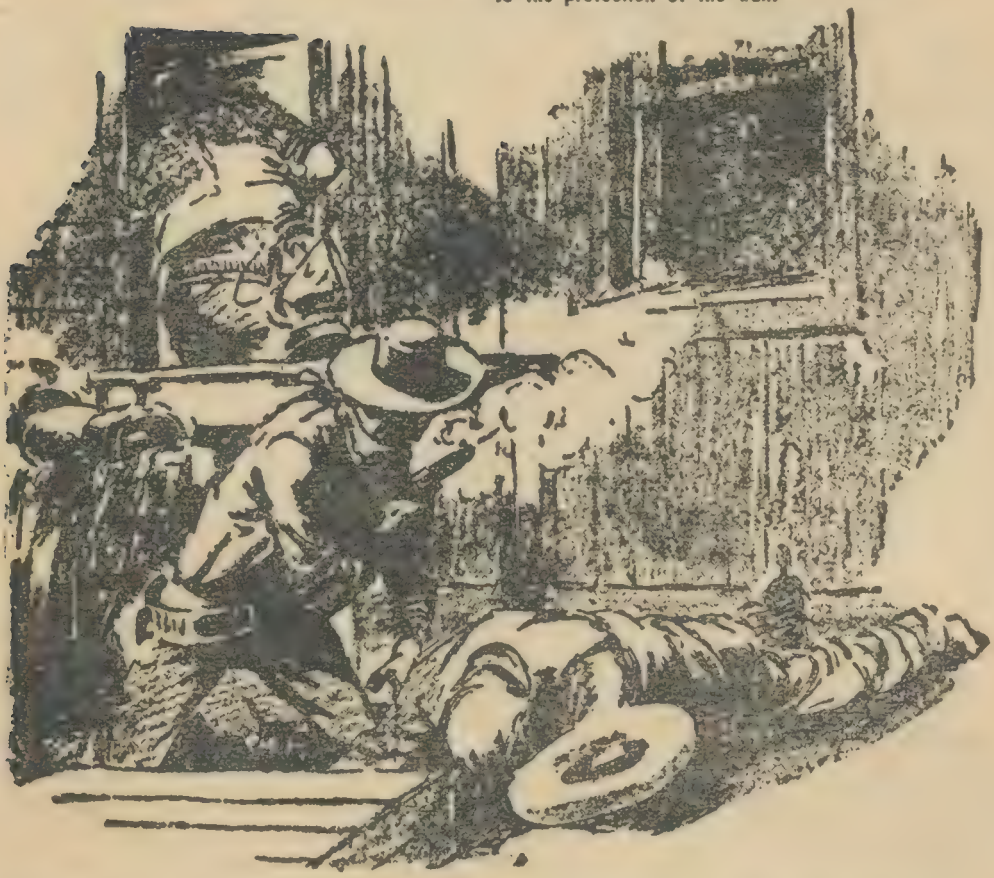
"That's what I say," Marty agreed again. But, each time, with less and less spirit. Marty squinted out over the sun-baked desert as they plodded along the trail. He took, all of a sudden, a big, deep sigh. Boy-oh-boy, were his feet tired.

"Boy-oh-boy, are my feet getting tired," he said.

"Mine too, for cripes sake," Link said.

But Marty had, regardless, a strange, deep sense of well-being. And Link actually started walking faster at the thought of a good cowpunching job....

Somehow he got the .45 from its holster, dragging himself to the protection of the wall!



Handling the shotgun or the ribbons, an overland pilot had his courage code!

GRAYBEARD WHO GREW UP

THAYNE LENHART looked at the man who had been his boss these last thirty years and said bitterly, "So now it's my turn to be put out to pasture like all the rest of the stock that ain't fit to run no more. Joe Decker, I never thought I'd see the day—"

Joe Decker turned red in the face. "Hang it, Thayne, that's not it at all!

by WILLARD LUCE

With this new schedule, the Allen Canyon stage lays over here all night. We can't just shove the bullion from the mines into the safe and forget it. We've got to have a watchman, someone we can depend on. Someone we can trust."

"Yeh," Lenhart nodded. "But why me?" He wasn't as tall as he once had been. Rheumatism had gnarled his hands and twisted his back. He walked with a limp and the lines of his face were deeply etched. "Why not Charlie Monroe?" he asked hopefully.

Joe Decker snorted. "You don't trust Charlie with your daughter, Thayne. Neither will we trust him with five thousand dollars worth of bullion."

"But why me?" Lenhart persisted. "I'm a driver, not a watchman."

"You were until the rheumatism crippled you all up. Doc Wallace says he can't understand how you even ride a Concord let alone drive one. From some of the reports I've heard, maybe you haven't been."

Thayne Lenhart didn't meet Decker's eyes. There was too much truth in what the stage manager had said. For the last month it had been tough even getting on top the Concord. Every bump, every lurch of the stage, had felt as though it would tear his body apart. Lenhart looked down at his gnarled hands, feeling suddenly worn out, old, useless. He realized now that he had ridden his reputation as a driver as far as he could ever ride it. And except for his daughter, he wasn't sorry.

He tried again, "But night's when I need to be home with Loretta. If Charlie Monroe—"

"I'm sorry, Lenhart, but I can't do anything about your private life," Decker told him impatiently. "If you are that afraid for your daughter, you better quit working altogether and just stay home and watch her."

Lenhart felt the embarrassment creep up his neck to his face. The way Joe Decker put it, it didn't sound right at all. He opened his mouth to explain, then closed it again. Joe Decker wouldn't understand anyway. He had never been married. He wouldn't know about trying to raise a motherless daughter. He just couldn't know.

"All right, Joe, I'll be here."

"At seven."

Thayne Lenhart nodded. He turned and limped out into the early morning sunshine, his spirits as cold as the chill that still lay upon the land. He didn't want to go home and face his daughter with the fact that he was through. He didn't want to—but there was nowhere else to go, nowhere he really wanted to go.

SHOVING his hands deeper into his pockets, he turned up the street. His shoulders were hunched a little more than usual against the cold that had laid a layer of white frost over the land. His breath showed white against the air.

He reached his house at the edge of town and rounded it and went inside through the kitchen door. He opened his mouth to call to Loretta. Then his mouth snapped shut as he stared at his daughter and Charlie Monroe. They had been in each other's arms when he had first opened the door. Now they stood a little apart, their embarrassment and their guilt showing on their faces.

Lenhart's face was the sick-grey color of wood ashes. His voice shook with the anger he couldn't control. "Get out, Monroe! *Get out!*" He pointed a gnarled finger at the door. "And if I ever catch you—"

"Father!" Loretta rushed against him, clutching at his coat. But Lenhart didn't look at his daughter, didn't see the terrible, desperate pleading in her eyes. "Father—"

"—I'll kill you, Monroe. So help me, I will!"

"Father, no! Don't—don't say that!"

Charlie Monroe still stood there, his face as white as Lenhart's. "I—I

don't understand what you've got against me, Mister Lenhart. I've never—"

"Get out!"

Monroe went then, slamming the door so that the frame house shook from the force of it.

Lenhart could feel the shaking of his daughter's body there in his arms, but she made no sound and the silence was a heavy, punishing thing.

Once again Thayne Lenhart felt his inadequacy to tell his daughter the things she needed to know. "He—he's a woman chaser, Loretta," he said at last. Somehow that was all he could tell her, and even this made him embarrassed and ill at ease.

"But he loves me, Dad, and I love him. He wants to marry me." Her voice seemed dead. There was no hope on her white, tear-stained face.

Lenhart's voice was gentle. "You're only sixteen, girl. You don't know—"

"Mother was only sixteen when she married you."

"And your mother died when you were born."

And so their talk ended once more, as it had so often ended these last few months, with nothing settled, nothing completed. Loretta turned from him and stood with her back towards him. He pushed his hands into his pockets and waited for her to turn back. When she didn't, he moved slowly outside, feeling sick and helpless and uncertain.

FOR SOME time he stood by his front gate with his hands in his pockets, feeling no heat from the sun. At eight sharp he heard the yell of the new driver and the crack of his whip. Looking townward, he saw the lift of the dust as the stage moved out from the hotel and along the street, still too far away for him to see who had replaced him at the ribbons. Then as the stage drew closer, Thayne Lenhart cursed softly.

Up in the driver's seat, Angus O'Neill cracked his whip and yelled once more. The stage came even with Lenhart and O'Neill called down to him, "You wouldn't be wantin' to go fer a ride, now would you, grandpa?"

The whip cracked again, and the stage and O'Neill's coarse laughter passed on.

Lenhart pushed away from his gate and moved out into the dust settling slowly back to the street. Angus O'Neill! Lenhart laughed bitterly. A man needed a drink to stand a thing like this.

Thayne Lenhart found Raymond Luke alone behind the bar of his Four Aces Saloon. The saloonman reached beneath the bar and placed a bottle of his better whiskey and a glass before Lenhart.

"I thought perhaps you would be needing a drink about as soon as you saw who they had put on top your stage this morning, Thayne." Luke's voice was soft and sympathetic. "The first one is always on the house."

Lenhart nodded, wondering how it was that Raymond Luke always knew these things before other people knew them. He could have seen O'Neill atop the Concord and figured it out, of course, but Luke always knew more than that. Somehow the saloonman had a way of knowing just about everything that happened in Allen's Junction.

Then Lenhart shrugged and reached for the bottle and the glass. He had his drink, shuddering against the raw cut of the whiskey.

"Charlie Monroe's been seeing a lot of the Parker brothers lately, Thayne. I thought you might like to know."

The glass made a sharp sound as Lenhart brought it down on the bar. He stared at Luke, but the saloonman's face was as unreadable. Raymond Luke was like that, giving out a bit of information here, a bit there, and letting the other person figure his own answers.

Thayne Lenhart had already figured his, and the stir of excitement inside made him reach for another drink.

Charlie Monroe and the Parker

brothers! If anyone hereabouts tried to crack the stage company safe, it would likely be the Parker brothers. And now Charlie Monroe might be with them! Charlie Monroe, the danged woman chaser who was after his own daughter!

"Charlie still seeing that little Mexican girl down in the valley?" Lenhart asked slowly..

Raymond Luke nodded. "And he's still spending half his nights with the dance hall girl over at the Silver Star. Charlie Monroe gets around all right."

Thayne Lenhart swore softly. But a lot of the bitterness had gone out of him now. He reached for another drink, laughing softly as though the whiskey had already made him a little drunk. He took this one without shuddering, and he said, "Luke, you're one devil of a good guy." His voice was a little thick.

Raymond Luke shook his head. "You just don't know, Charlie. But I do hate to see a good man get it in the neck. Now take Angus O'Neill, for instance. I'll bet you five to one Angus puts your stage over the cliff at Allen Canyon dugway before the week's out. Angus is a good mule skinner all right. He can drive a freight outfit from here to hades and back again, but those stage teams aren't mules and that Concord isn't a freight outfit. He'll put it over the dugway just as sure as shooting."

Thayne Lenhart nodded. "It would just serve 'im blame well right if he did. By heaven, I hope he does!" Lenhart slapped his hand down on the bar. "I jus' hope he does."

He had another drink. He had a great many drinks before the morning was over. Most of the time he spent back in Raymond Luke's private office. Most of the time he talked about the stage company, about Joe Decker, about the bullion shipments, and about the safe in the stage company's office. About one o'clock Luke started pouring black coffee down him. When soberness finally came, Lenhart couldn't remember what it had been that he had said, but the fear of what it might have been, made cold knots out of his stomach.

He stared at Raymond Luke, but the saloonman only smiled. "For a non-drinker, Thayne, you sure consumed a lot of good whiskey today. You better go on home now and try to get some sleep. You wouldn't want to fall asleep your first night on the job."

Lenhart nodded still wondering what it had been he had said to Luke. He swallowed a couple times, then shrugged, wishing he had never learned the combination of the stage company's safe. That was the one thing—

AT SEVEN-THIRTY that evening the stage came in from the mines. Lenhart felt a little foolish standing there holding a shotgun while two men carried the strongbox from the stage into the office. There was no stage on Sundays, and five days out of the other six there was nothing in the strongbox except pieces of iron to make it heavy. Thayne Lenhart felt like a kid playing cops and robbers—that is, until he noticed Joe Decker. Maybe it was just that this was the first night they were keeping the strongbox over, but Joe Decker was nervous, jumpy. The longer Lenhart watched him, the more convinced the watchman became that there was bullion in the strongbox.

Some of Decker's tenseness worked itself into him and he stopped feeling foolish about the shotgun. He wished he could remember what he had told Raymond Luke, but he couldn't.

The two men pushed the strongbox into the safe and Joe Decker closed it and spun the dial. He fussed there until the two men went back outside then turned to Lenhart.

"Be blame careful tonight, Thayne. *And no more drinking!*"

Thayne Lenhart's jaw dropped open. "I—but—"

"I know all about it, Thayne. But remember this: you don't drink when

you handle the ribbons in this company, and you don't drink when you handle a shotgun. Don't forget it again." Decker stood there a moment longer, pushing the weight of his eyes against Lenhart. Then he turned and went out without another word.

Thayne Lenhart stared after this man who had been his boss for thirty years now. There was a tightness about Lenhart's lips and about his eyes. In those thirty years, Joe Decker had never before spoken to him like that. Not once.

Lenhart ran his tongue out over his lips and rubbed his sweaty hands up and down his pants legs. That's the way it is, he thought bitterly, when a man gets too old and stove-up to make his regular run. Some bit of conscience prevents a boss from firing him outright; so the boss makes his life so miserable he has to quit.

"By heaven," he whispered to himself, "I wish I had a bottle. "I—"

He moved up and stood by the half-open door until the Barton kid came along. "Say, Eddie, run over to Raymond Luke's and get me a quart of Old Crow, will you? Tell Luke to charge it, and here's a quarter for your trouble."

"Why sure, Mister Lenhart." Eddie Barton went off at a run.

Thayne Lenhart grinned defiantly down the street towards Joe Decker's residence.

IT WAS a long night there in the stage company office with shotgun and a bottle of Old Crow for company. On the wall the big clock ticked steadily, monotonously. Out back Lenhart occasionally caught the sound of the horses in the corral, stomping restlessly. Out front a rider rode past, the hoofs of his mount making padded sounds against the street's deep dust. There were other sounds, too, the quick scurry of a mouse across the floor, the distant yapping of a coyote.

Then he heard the faint scraping sound at the back door and swung the shotgun towards it. The scraping came again. Then Thayne Lenhart heard his name whispered through the keyhole.

"Lenhart! *Lenhart!*"

Thayne Lenhart cupped his hand over the shotgun hammer to deaden the click as he pulled it back.

"Lenhart!"

Charlie Monroe's voice held a pleading, desperate quality, but the watchman didn't answer. Instead he rose slowly from the wooden box he had been using for a chair. Silently spreading his feet and bracing himself, he raised the shotgun to his shoulder. In this way he waited for Charlie Monroe to unlock the door and step inside.

He even considered sending a blast through the door itself. The door was old, its panels thin. He couldn't miss on a shot like that. But he kept remembering that he had threatened Charlie Monroe only that morning. Shot through the door that way, someone might talk. But Charlie had been seeing a lot of the Parker brothers lately. Once he unlocked the door and stepped inside, there would be no question, none at all.

It seemed an eternity of silence that he waited. Even the sound of the clock, so loud only a moment before, was smothered out. There was only his quick nervous breathing.

Then he heard the sound of the doorknob turning, and even his breathing stopped.

But the door didn't open. Lenhart heard Charlie Monroe's weight go against it, but the lock held, and Monroe said desperately, *"Lenhart!"*

Still Thayne Lenhart waited with a stubborn, silent patience.

Then he heard the door catch snap back to its original position and the sound of Charlie Monroe's boots retreating into the night. The air came out of Lenhart's lungs in a disappointed gust, and he lowered the shotgun's hammer.

But they would be back, he told himself. Charlie Monroe had come first to lure him away. Now that he

had failed, they would all come—Jess and Big Bert and Tony Parker. *And Charlie Monroe!*

Thayne waited while the ticking came back to the clock and the lonesome sound of the coyote returned to the hills. He waited, slowly becoming conscious of the growing light in the room. He could see the clock now and it was only midnight, a long time until dawn. And, too, the light of dawn wasn't red; it didn't flicker.

OUTSIDE Lenhart heard the excited run of boots along the board sidewalk, caught the distant, high-pitched yelling of the men.

Struggling to his feet, Thayne Lenhart limped to the front window and pulled gently at the shade. From the distant end of the street, he saw the blood-red glow that was in the sky. Cautiously he twisted the key in the lock and opened the door a crack.

Lenhart could see the flames leaping upward from old J.B. Peterson's ice house. He could hear their angry cracking. Men rushed about before the flames like black shadows no bigger than ants.

Then Thayne Lenhart saw something else—his daughter and Charlie Monroe. They were across the street and down a way and Charlie was talking to her, his hands moving in excited gesticulations. Savagely Lenhart jerked open the door. But even as he moved across the board sidewalk, Charlie Monroe left her, running a few paces then disappearing between two buildings.

"Loretta!"

Lenhart stepped off the board walk into the street's deep dust.

"Loretta!"

She turned and saw him then and came rushing towards him. "Father! Father, you've got to get back! They're going to make a try for bullion tonight!" She came against him, tugging, jerking at his coat lapel.

"Who told you?" he asked her cautiously.

"Charlie. Father—father, you're wrong about Charlie. I just saw him and he's been trying all over to find you so he could warn you."

"And I suppose," he asked bitterly, "he's just been hanging around the Parker brothers until they told him they were going to rob the stage company tonight, then he ran to tell me so he could marry my daughter for a reward?"

"Father, you're not fair! You're not—"

"Where is he now, then? Probably back with the Parkers, getting ready to help them! If he knew they were going to try for the bullion, why didn't he tell Sheriff Haws? Why didn't—"

"He went to the stage company office and tried to tell you first!" she told him angrily. "It's all over town about your drinking this morning. He didn't tell Haws because he was afraid you were off somewhere drunk, and he didn't want you to lose your job. He—"

Thayne Lenhart laughed. "Didn't want me to lose my job? Now that's—"

Suddenly he stopped. Back there he had heard a sound, back there—in the stage company office...

"Get under cover!" he ordered almost savagely, shoving at his daughter. What a crazy fool he had been! Charlie Monroe hadn't failed. He had succeeded only too well! Thayne Lenhart was out of the office all right, lured out in the street, with his own daughter used as bait, backlighted by a fire three blocks away!

BITTERLY, he turned towards the office, jerking back on the Greener's hammer.

Had he been younger, he might have made a run for it. But all he could manage now was a walk, a stiff-backed, limping walk. The dust pushed out from beneath his boots, leaving a soft, silent padding. But silence wouldn't save him now. They were already inside watching him through the narrow crack of the partly opened door.

Down the street the flames from the icehouse suddenly leaped higher. The sound of the roof caving in came to Thayne Lenhart, but he didn't look.

He kept his eyes on the door, slowly growing nearer. Another foot. Another ten feet. Twice he had caught the flash of a gun barrel, but there had been no flame, no bullet. And in this Lenhart found a hope. They didn't want to shoot, didn't want to attract attention.

He reached the steps, suddenly wondering if Charlie Monroe was inside. The blamed woman chaser had had enough time to circle around and come in at the back.

Without looking down, Lenhart stepped upwards. But the board walk was a high step from the dusty street. Pain shot through his rheumatic leg, forcing a groan from his lips. His upper foot caught the edge of the planks, throwing his weight forward.

As he fell, the shotgun in his hands suddenly came alive. Crashing out its shot and flame, it tore itself from his hands, numbing them with the pain. But its shot went true. Tearing its way through the door opening, it caught Big Bert Parker in the chest almost cutting him in two.

The door crashed wide open, and all hell seemed to break loose inside. Lead smashed into the board before Lenhart's face. Burning, stinging slivers struck him in the face and hands. Desperately he rolled over, feeling the burn of a bullet along his back.

Somehow he got his own .45 from its holster. Somehow he dragged himself to the protection of the wall beside the door.

A flame streaked out at him from the darkness, and Lenhart laid a shot to either side of it. A man cried out in pain. Lenhart's smile of satisfaction was shut off by the sudden volley of lead that beat into the wall behind which he was hiding. One bullet tore at his upper arm on the left side, another nicked his ribs.

With the shots came the pounding of boots on the wooden floor inside. They were coming after him!

STILL ON his one knee, he edged out away from the wall so as to have more room. They were almost to the door; Lenhart could tell by the beat of their boots. He raised the .45 and poured his four remaining shells into the opening.

Jess Parker's scream died in his throat as his body crashed into the door jamb. He bounced back knocking into the other two men.

At that moment the back door flew open crashing against the wall. A new gun emptied its shells into the fight. The two standing outlaws were backlighted in the doorway, easy targets. The lead that caught them in the back smashed them out through the open door and onto the board walk beside Thayne Lenhart.

"Lenhart!"

Thayne Lenhart's stiff fingers fumbled a fresh shell into his gun. The .45 clicked closed and Lenhart said, "Yes, Charlie?"

Charlie Monroe moved across the room and came into the light from the distant fire. He stopped there in the doorway and stared down at Lenhart slowly raising the .45.

"No, Lenhart! No!"

"You're even more of a rat than I thought, Charlie! You're not only a woman chaser, you're a dirty double crosser besides. As soon as you saw the game was up, you turned tail, didn't you, Charlie? And you were blamed good and sure you killed your last two pals so they couldn't talk. But it didn't do you any good. I'm going to kill you, just like I said I would." Slowly the hammer moved backwards on the double-action Colt.

"*Father!* Father, it—"

"Thayne Lenhart, you're a loco old fool."

Lenhart jerked as though he had been shot. The last words had come from the limp figure on the board walk beside him. It was the voice of

Raymond Luke. The man was dying, yet seemed curiously at peace.

"Charlie Monroe was never one of us. I—I just made it up, told you so you'd be suspicious—so you'd look for Charlie and not for me."

"What about the little Mexican girl down in the valley?" Lenhart demanded. "What about the dance hall girl over at the Silver Star?"

SLOWLY Raymond Luke turned his head so as to look at Loretta Lenhart. Even in the light of the slowly dying fire, Thayne Lenhart could see the regret that filled them.

"I—I made that up, too." He laughed softly, painfully, as a man accepting the inevitable. "The first time I ever saw your daughter, Thayne, I— Oh, it doesn't matter, I knew then it would never work, but I had to try. Love's funny that way." The saloonman coughed. He turned back to look at Thayne Lenhart and the watchman knew he was talking about the robbery now. "Everything was planned so carefully, even the fire to keep people down the street. Even the—you didn't drink the whiskey, did you, Thayne?"

Lenhart shook his head.

"But why not? You ordered it."

Thayne Lenhart shrugged. "I ordered it because I was mad at Joe Decker for telling me not to drink any more. I—well I really didn't want it. Like you said this morning, I'm pretty much of a non-drinker, and when I got to thinking it over, I realized that Joe really didn't mean it like it sounded. He was just worried about the bullion and didn't think."

Raymond Luke laughed softly again. His voice was a whisper. "It's too bad you didn't, Thayne. It was doped. If you had, you would have been sleeping peacefully now, and the Parker boys and I would have had ourselves five thousand dollars—"

The saloonman didn't finish. Slowly his breathing stopped and he joined the three Parker brothers in death.

Thayne Lenhart looked up at the man still standing in the open doorway. "I—I'm right sorry, son. You see—"

But he never got to finish. With a cry of happiness, Loretta rushed past him and into the arms that Charlie Monroe held open for her. Lenhart watched them for a moment, then his vision got blurry and he reached up and brushed at his eyes with a stiff, gnarled hand.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946

Of Western Short Stories, published quarterly at New York, N. Y. for October 1, 1950.
State of New York) ss.
County of New York)

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Robert Solomon, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Western Short Stories, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Interstate Publishing Corp., 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.; Editor, Robert Erisman, 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.; Managing editor, Martin Goodman, 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.; Business manager, Robert Solomon, 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.) Interstate Publishing Corp., 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.; Martin Goodman, 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

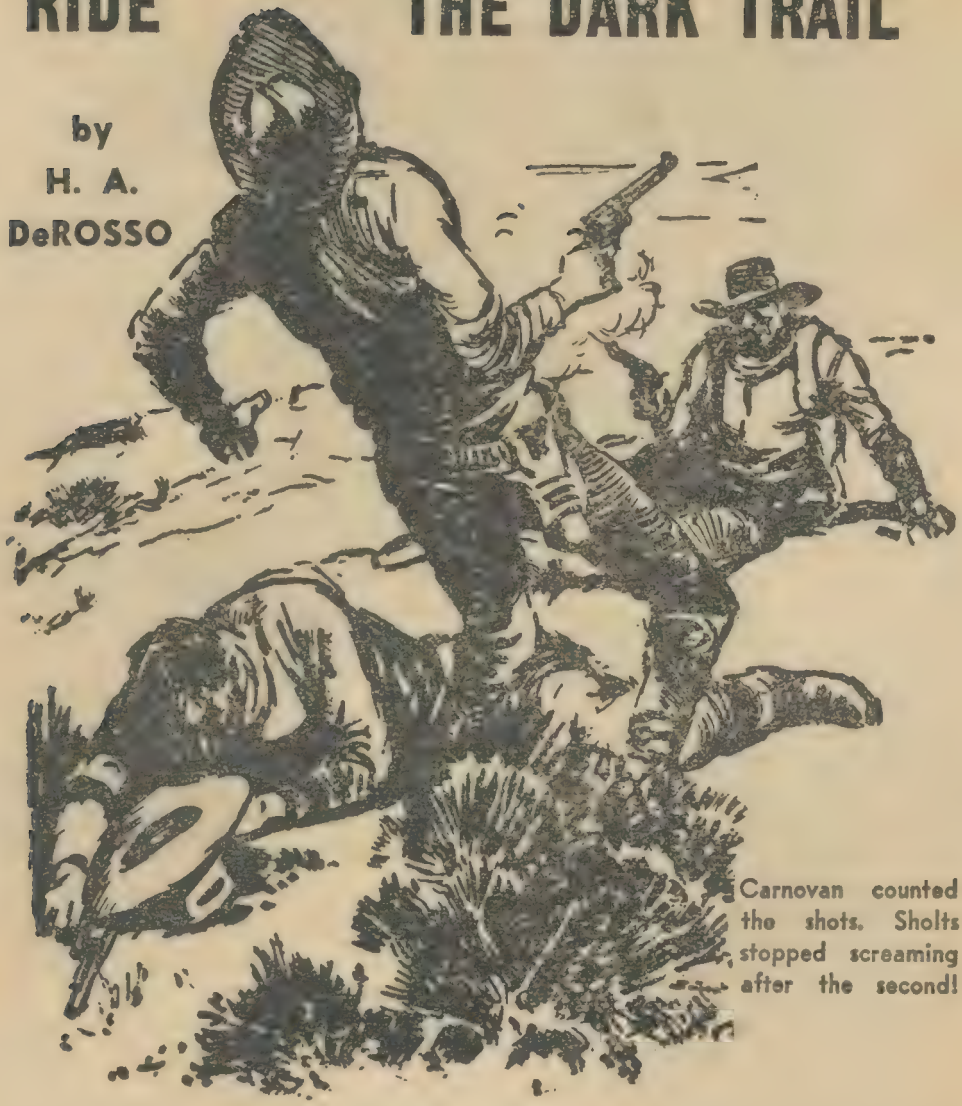
5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

ROBERT SOLOMON
(Signature of Business Manager)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of September 1950. Lydia Pearlstein (My commission expires March 30, 1950. (SEAL)

RIDE THE DARK TRAIL

by H. A. DeROSSO



Carnovan counted the shots. Sholts stopped screaming after the second!

The hate must rule Carnovan now. The redheaded girl in the faded blue levis could not reach him now. His gun was all that mattered . . . .

THE PAIN from the thong about his forehead was a tight, throbbing, gnawing ache. The darkness in the far corners of the dim room swirled and swam in his gaze, the hurt was so great in his mind. There was a wetness on his face, coursing in tiny trickles down his cheeks, and he did not know whether the moisture was sweat or his own blood.

The voice came out of the shimmering darkness, indolent, faintly caustic:

"What did you say your name was?"

"Carnovan. Eddie Carnovan."

"Carnovan," the voice murmured musingly. "It could very well be. An

alias is usually much simpler. What are you doing here in the Baranquillas, Carnovan?"

"Just riding through."

"Are you sure, Carnovan?"

Carnovan found he could endure most of the pain now. Through aching eyes, he tried to place them. He knew there were four of them in front of him and one behind him. The one behind manipulated the thong laced about his head.

The room steadied somewhat before Carnovan's eyes but the lights and shadows still danced lurchingly. A small breeze came in through the tiny window of the hut, bending the flame of the candle at a sharp angle, guttering the fire, almost putting it out. But then the breeze was gone and the candle burned evilly again.

"Did you hear me, Carnovan?" the voice said idly out of the shadows just beyond the reach of the candlelight. "Give it another twist, Nelson."

"Pronto," said Nelson, and the rawhide thong bit deeper, and the pain flashed anew across Carnovan's eyes, wrenching a tense groan out of him.

"I said did you hear me, Carnovan?"

"I hear you."

"Answer me then. What are you doing in the Baranquillas?"

"I've told you. I'm just passing through. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Until you convince me, Carnovan."

He tried his bonds again but he was securely tied to the chair. He studied the carkness, concentrating on that one point, and through the dimness the faint outlines of the face began to show.

It was a small, narrow face. The shadows hid the harshness in it, tempered somewhat the hot glare of the eyes. The scent of good Havana tobacco drifted to Carnovan's nostrils and as the other took the cigar from his mouth, Carnovan saw the white, ivory holder.

He was seated on a three-legged stool, cigar held languidly in a pale hand beside his thigh. His body was bent forward slightly at the waist and Carnovan could feel the piercing measure of those eyes on him.

"Where are you from, Carnovan?"

"Arizona."

"Arizona's a big place."

THE PAIN was a retching, maddening blaze behind Carnovan's eyes. To ease it a little, he tried concentrating on the others, those others farther back in the shadows but all he could make out were their murky shapes in the thick, concealing gloom. One of them, the woman, kept moving restlessly about as if she had no stomach for it, going now and then outside, but always returning.

"I said Arizona's a big place, Carnovan. Give it a twist, Nelson."

"Pronto."

Carnovan tried to cry out but it was constricting, chewing before he could articulate the sound, and all he could do was clench his teeth to the agony of it but even so the moan tore out of him.

"I'll ask you again, Carnovan. Where are you from?"

"Perhaps, Senor Eaker, you will permit me now?" It was said almost fawningly. It came from the Mexican in the tall, peaked sombrero. He had come ahead into the light of the candle and, glancing that way, Carnovan saw the glitter of the knife in the Mexican's hands.

Eaker waved a hand in an irritated gesture. "There is no need for you. The thong will be sufficient."

"My cuchillo will make him talk," the Mexican said softly. "I swear he will reveal all he knows. Should I begin, Senor Eaker?"

The Mexican's thumb caressed the edge of his blade. Eaker straightened on his stool, crossing his knees, and there was a pensive pause in his silence. Lifting the cigar, he drew heavily on it, making the tip glow a deep crimson, then he took it away

and let the smoke exhale, making a soft, pleased sound.

"Should I, Carnovan?" asked Eaker quietly. "Which would you prefer? More of the thong or Senor Amador's cuchillo? Ah? You will not state your preference? Should it be the thong then?"

"You doubt me?" broke in the Mexican, voice rising slightly. "You do not think I can do it with my cuchillo?"

"Patience, Senor Amador," said Eaker soothingly. "Do you want to try the cuchillo just for a change, Carnovan? The place is rather dim but he is quite skillful with his cuchillo. Ah, yes, Senor Amador is the best knife-thrower in all Mexico."

"All Mexico?" cried Amador indignantly. He began thumping his chest. "I, Florentino Amador, am the best knife-thrower in the whole world. I can split a playing card at ten paces. I can light a match at twenty paces. I can—"

"Don't be boorish," said Eaker with patent disgust. He fluttered a petulant hand and Amador cut off his words abruptly and dropped back into the shadows again. Eaker leaned forward, folding his arms across his thighs.

"Now, Carnovan, I'll try just once more. Where did you say you were from?"

"Yuma."

"Ah? Yuma? The Territorial Prison?"

"Yes."

"Really, Carnovan?"

IT CAME out of Carnovan in a racked, tortured way. His helplessness had filled him with a vile, tormenting despair. The studied, merciless cruelty of these men stirred a hot, feral anger in Carnovan, bringing the words out of him loudly.

"Damn you, yes! Why don't you write the warden a letter? Why don't you examine the records of Edward Carnovan? Yes, I was in Yuma, yes! I broke out and I got as far as here in the Baranquillas where you stopped me. Now do you know enough?"

"Carnovan!" exclaimed Eaker in a shocked, reproving tone. "You aren't going to break down on us, are you, after being such a paragon of mute stoicism? We really must be very careful, Carnovan. Men engaged in our—ah—enterprise must be exceedingly cautious indeed. Are you sure your breaking out of Yuma was legitimate?"

Carnovan's breathing was a ragged sound in his ears. He sucked in his breath in a moaning wheeze, fighting all the while the insistent, excruciating pain pressing down on his eyes and brain, and he tried to focus his glance past Eaker and saw that the woman had left the room again.

The sweat—or blood—was dripping off his chin, falling with soft, spattering noises on the dirt floor of the hut. He tried shutting his eyes but that doubled the shoots of pain and he opened them quickly, breathing heavily with the hurt of the effort.

He bit down on each word as it came out of him. "Yes, my escape was on the square."

"How can we be sure of that?"

It flared in Carnovan again. "You can't," he shouted, then clamped his teeth shut again. His voice trembled from the effort at control he imposed on it. "What are you trying to make me say? Who do you think I am?"

It was the man to Eaker's right who spoke now. Carnovan looked that way but the man was too far back in the shadows, probably leaning against the wall, and only the sound of his voice came to tell Carnovan that he was there.

"A government man wouldn't come into the Baranquillas as such. He wouldn't live long if he did. But if he had himself put in Yuma and then broke out and came here as a fleeing convict, he might think he could fool somebody."

"An astute observation, Worthington," said Eaker. "Don't you agree, Carnovan?"

"I'm no government marshal. You've gone all over my clothes. You found no badge or commission on me."

"True," said Eaker, "but you wouldn't be foolhardy enough to carry them with you. Did you leave them at the territorial capital? Is that where your papers are, Carnovan?"

"I'm no lawman. Won't you believe one thing I tell you?"

"Why were you sent to Yuma?"

"I was framed."

"No? The old standby. I must say you're doing a remarkably skillful job of it, Carnovan. So you were framed? For what?"

"Killing a man."

"And they sent you to Yuma?"

"Yes."

"Give it a twist, Nelson."

This time Carnovan screamed. He writhed in the chair and wrenched at his bonds until the ache in his wrists somehow cancelled a little of the searing agony in his head and he sat there moaning wretchedly.

The pain passed a little from in front of his eyes and he saw that Eaker had risen to his feet. The man's voice came, tired and yawning.

"This will be all for tonight, Carnovan. We will resume in the morning. You'll have the entire night to consider it. I trust you'll arrive at a prudent decision by morning. It would be much easier for all if you did..."

HE WAS alone in the hut. He thought that with their going he could sleep but bound in the chair like he was, with the cramps beginning to plague him, with his skull a hot, suffocating, torturing, throbbing mass, with his eyes aching, he could find no rest.

A small breeze flitted intermittently in through the tiny window, now and then touching his face with a tantalous torment. They had removed the rawhide thong but the intensity of the pain remained, racking the top of his skull.

He sat there, agonized eyes moving from the gray opening of the window to the larger rectangle of the door, and he did not know how much time elapsed before the door showed him the black blot of someone entering.

A sudden, primal anger flowed through Carnovan. They could not wait for morning, could they? They had to go at it again right now.

A pungent curse rasped out of him and fast on its heels came the soft whisper. "Hush. They'll hear you."

He felt the cool hand touch his mouth, covering it, and the sudden, savage impulse swept through him to bite at it, but as his mouth was opening the scent of peach blossoms struck his nostrils and his breath inhaled sharply.

"You," he whispered hoarsely.

"You must be quiet," she said, working at his bonds with a knife. "They're all asleep and we must not wake them."

The bonds loosened about Carnovan and the shocked realization came to him that he was free. But he sat unmoving in the chair, filled with a strange, vexing wonder.

"Come," she said impatiently, tugging at his sleeve.

"You're one of them," said Carnovan suspiciously. "I saw you with them."

"Please," she begged, taking his arm in both her hands. "I haven't time for explanations now. I—I couldn't stand what they were doing to you. I never knew they were like that. I can't let you remain in their hands. Now will you come?"

At first, he could hardly stand, doubling up under the cramping pain, and she had to support him until the agony passed and he could stand alone. Then they went quietly outside.

She had the horses ready and helped Carnovan up into his saddle. His shell belt and holstered Remington .44 dangled from the horn. Looking back at the sleeping shapes huddled in their blankets outside the hut, Carnovan's fingers curled about the grip of the

Remington while the vengeful madness piled down on him.

"Come," the girl was whispering urgently. "We must hurry. Come, Carnovan."

Reluctantly, he released the .44, letting it slide back in its holster, and, gently touching his bay with the spurs, took after the girl....

THE BARANQUILLAS lifted their barren, ragged crests toward the sullen, brassy sky. Up this high the air was rare, filled with a tingling chillness, warping the heat out of the sun. The empty desolateness of the land reached into Carnovan, stirring a kindred loneliness in him, filling him with a vague, indefinable sadness.

He sat on a rock with his face in the sun, catching all the warmth of it that he could, feeling some of the pain ease in his head under its meager warmth. His bay and the girl's pinto had found a few tufts of sparse, dried grass and were nibbling half-heartedly at them.

She had bathed the wound made by the rawhide thong with water from her canteen and had bandaged his head. Now she sat on the ground below the rock, staring up at him.

They had not spoken much. There had been too much hurt in Carnovan, too much hate, too much thinking of vengeance to allow room for anything else. However, now that the ache was lessening, some of the malignant anger lifted from him, and he began to notice the girl and how she looked.

She sat with her knees drawn up to her chin, her arms hugging her legs. She was wearing faded blue levis that had a patch on the left knee. The black and red checkered flannel shirt did little to conceal the fullness of her bosom. Her black flop-brimmed stetson she had dropped on the ground beside her and the sun, playing in her hair, struck red gold in the vagrant, disheveled locks.

She had a round, poignant face with a rather wide mouth and tiny nose and blue eyes set wide apart. A few, scattered freckles bridged her nose and the sun had darkened her skin to a golden brown.

Carnovan stared at her a long time. Color mounted to her cheeks under his studied scrutiny and finally she looked away in crimson confusion.

Some warmth came to Carnovan's face, too, and to cover it, he said, "Who are you?"

She put her chin down on her knees and studied the ground. "You can call me Natalie."

It was still there in Carnovan in a perplexing, jumbled way. He just could not get it straight in his mind. He ran over it carefully, experiencing a slight touch of anger when it did not clear for him, and asked:

"Why did you help me?"

She looked up at him now, taking her chin away from her knees, and her face was very grave and earnest. "I could not stand it, Carnovan. I couldn't let a thing like that happen to anybody."

"Yet you're one of them. You were with them. How come you turned against them just to help me?"

She cocked her head slightly to one side, staring unseeingly past him while a small, vague smile touched her lips. "I wonder," she said scarcely above a whisper. "I wonder if you'd understand, Carnovan."

"Try me."

SHE PAUSED pensively. When she spoke, it was in a slow, thoughtful way. "Have you ever seen country like this, Carnovan? The Baranquillas so forbidding and barren and below them the desert. There are not many people here, Carnovan. A girl gets dreadfully lonely in country like this and with so few people around she hasn't much choice in picking her friends. Are you beginning to understand?"

He nodded, watching her now with a new, stirring interest moving in him.

"I knew what Eaker and the others were. They run guns to the rebels in

Mexico. They run wet cattle both ways across the border. They do some smuggling. I knew all that but there's no other kind of people around here. I knew them for what they did but I never knew until last night what they were." She shuddered. "I couldn't stand their torturing you, Carnovan."

She was looking full at Carnovan now in an almost bold way and when he looked back she did not color this time and held his glance.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," she said quietly, "but what are you doing here in the Baranquillas, Carnovan?"

Memory of it brought a taste of the old, bitter purpose to Carnovan. After the agony of the previous night, it all seemed so far back, almost beyond recall, but her words had brought it back in a gelid, rancoring way.

She smiled suddenly, for the first time since he'd known her, and it was completely disarming. "I won't use a thong on you, Carnovan."

A smile came to his lips, too. "It's like I told Eaker," said Carnovan. "I was in Yuma and broke out."

That strange graveness touched her mouth again. "Was it awful, Carnovan?"

"It was hell," he said feelingly.

She was watching him with wide eyes full of a tender interest. Carnovan felt something begin in him and, not knowing exactly what it was, a faint irritableness moved through him.

"Then you're on the dodge?" said Natalie. "Is that why you came to the Baranquillas? Because there is no law in these mountains? Is that why, Carnovan?"

Now that old, rankling purpose was there in him again, needling his mind, forcing everything else out of his comprehension, leaving only the pure hate there to eat at his heart, so that the words came out of him involuntarily.

"I'm looking for a man," he growled.

"A man?"

The hate was strong in Carnovan now. It blazed across his mind, narrowing his eyes, thinning his lips, making the cords stand out in his neck.

"He framed me," Carnovan said viciously. "He had me sent to Yuma for life. After the hell I've gone through, I don't particularly care about clearing my name any more. When I find him, I'd just as soon kill him."

Her voice came angling in softly through the rage that possessed him. "Is he here in the Baranquillas?"

"He was here. A prisoner came to Yuma three months ago and said he'd seen him here. I broke out right after that and came right here."

"Who is he, Carnovan? I know most everybody in the mountains and the desert. Perhaps I know him."

He looked at her narrowly. His heart was thumping hard and a vicious eagerness filled him. After five years, perhaps the waiting would soon be over. Perhaps he'd find him.

His throat was thick and the words were hoarse and hurting when they came out. "His name is Ben Sholts."

"Sholts?" she said, wrinkling her brow. "Ben Sholts? I don't believe I know the name."

It all went suddenly out of Carnovan. The despair returned and the tormenting frustration. He put his face in his hands and sat there, savoring the bitterness and gall, and when he looked up Natalie was standing beside him, a compassionate smile on her face.

"It isn't that hopeless, Carnovan," she was saying soothingly. "He most likely changed his name. If he's here, you'll find him. I'll help you, Carnovan. Now we better get started if we want to make it out of the Baranquillas before night..."

THE GIRL said she had a ranch down on the rim of the desert and they reached the place at dusk. It was a miserable, rundown layout. A small, two-room dobe house, a dobe barn and some old pole corrals.

The night was quiet and their horses,

moving, made small, muted sounds. They dismounted at the corrals and turned their mounts in. Then they started for the house, the girl leading the way.

She passed through the door inside and Carnovan followed. There had been nothing to arouse his suspicions. But then he was too weary and his head still ached and he had built up a complete confidence in this quiet, disarming girl.

Even as he framed himself in the doorway he sensed them and his hand dove for his Remington. The voice came, insolently cold, stopping Carnovan with his fingers just curling about the grip of the .44, filling him with an icy apprehension.

"If you don't mind a slug in your belly, go right ahead and pull, Carnovan!"

Gingerly, he took his fingers away, lifting both hands waist high, and in that instant a match sputtered and then the hurricane lantern began to burn.

It was almost like the night before. They were there, all four of them, waiting for him. There was Eaker, slight and trim in his whipcord riding breeches, an arrogant smugness on his small, sharp features. There was the short, paunchy, ugly Florentino Amador in his tall, peaked hat, lovingly caressing the sharp edge of his knife. And the big, burly-chested, brown-mustached man with the huge, bowed legs who answered to the name of Worthington. And holding his long-barreled Colt .45 on Carnovan was the tall, slim, blond rider who was called Pronto Nelson.

Seeing them again like this filled Carnovan with a sudden, reckless anger. The impulse to draw and to hell with the consequences swept almost irresistably through him. His hand ached for the grip of the Remington, his will called for it, and, as the sweat broke out on his face, he submerged it forcefully within him and turned his anger volubly on the girl.

She was standing to one side, rather tense and straight, her hands clenched at her sides. She kept glancing from Nelson's poised .45 to Carnovan and now at the fury in his face she fell back a step.

"You cheap little tramp," Carnovan began. "You two-faced, lying cheat. "You—"

"That will be enough, Carnovan," Eaker's cold tone interrupted. "You should thank Natalie rather than denounce her. I would have preferred continuing with the thong. I gather she obtained the same information from you much less painfully. Yes, it was her scheme to have her aid you in escaping from us and thus perhaps win your confidence. Thank her, Carnovan. She saved you quite a bit of discomfort."

"Is it true?" Carnovan asked of the girl.

She nodded and smiled, some of the tenseness going out of her. "It was best for you. Don't you see, Carnovan? They had to be sure you weren't a government marshal and they'd have done anything to find out. I convinced them that by letting me help you escape, I could learn all without further use of a thong or a knife."

Carnovan smiled ruefully. "I thought we'd got away pretty easy last night. I'm sorry for what I just said."

She smiled warmly. "That' all right, Carnovan."

He glanced at Nelson. "Does he have to keep on pointing that thing?"

"Put away your gun, Pronto," said the girl. "Carnovan's all right. He's just passing through. Aren't you, Carnovan?"

Nelon looked queryingly at Eaker and the man nodded. Shrugging, Nelon holstered his Colt. Eaker was watching Carnovan narrowly, studiously taking in the ragged two weeks' growth of black whiskers on his face, the gaunt, purposeful planes of his features, the hawk-like, piercing gray eyes the long, bony frame and the loose-

jointed grace of him. Eakers's lips pursed slightly.

"Is Natalie right, Carnovan?"

"Not exactly. I'm looking for a man. I heard I'd find him in the Baranquillas. His name is Ben Sholts. Do you know him?"

The girl uttered a soft laugh. "I told him there's no one by that name in either the desert or the mountains or along the whole border for all I knew. Am I not right, Ward?"

Eaker lifted a small, delicate hand to his chin, began caressing it speculatively. "He really escaped from Yuma, Natalie?"

"Yes. He says this Sholts framed him there."

Eaker kept on rubbing his chin, his narrowed gaze riveted on Carnovan's face. "Will you accept my apology, Carnovan?" asked Eaker suddenly. "We just can't take chances. I'm sorry about the thong and all that but we had to be sure about you. Can you forget it?"

"Sure," said Carnovan carefully. "Now can I go?"

Eaker's thin lips curved in a dry, unaccustomed smile. "If you wish. But I thought you wanted to find Ben Sholts?"

That stiffened Carnovan. He glared suspiciously at Eaker. The smile stayed frozen like a mask on the man's face. "I thought there was no one by that name here," Carnovan said slowly.

"Natalie never knew him," said Eaker. "Sholts spends almost all his time down in Mexico. He's an agent for de la Luz, the revolutionist."

"Is this straight?" asked Carnovan.

"Why don't you hang around and find out? Better yet, why not go to Mexico with us. We're expecting some guns before morning from—Lieutenant Bassett. We're running those guns to de la Luz. Who knows, we might run across Sholts. Why not throw in with us, Carnovan?..."

THERE WAS some straw in a corner of the barn and Carnovan lay down on this and dropped off. The others slept in the house. All the pain he had endured, all the weariness hit him suddenly the moment Carnovan closed his eyes, bringing an instant, druglike quality to his sleep.

He did not know how long he slumbered. It was the voice edging in through the heavy drowsiness, probing at his brain, nagging him with a soft, insistent irritation. His eyes were leaden and would not open. His mind kept dropping off but the voice persisted.

"Carnovan. Wake up, Carnovan. It's me. Wake up, Eddie."

Carnovan rolled on his back and that was as far as he got. The sleepy numbness enveloped his consciousness again and he forgot his purpose and dozed again.

"Carnovan," the voice insisted. "Don't you want to see me, Eddie? Wake up."

It was the familiarity of the voice working in through the heavy slumber to Carnovan's mind. Recognition hit him with a jolt, rocking him wide awake, eyes aching in the light of the lantern.

The man stood there, tense and tall, holding the lantern high with his left hand. In his right, he gripped a long-barreled .44 pointed at Carnovan.

"Sholts!" Carnovan breathed.

The man smiled. With a nod he indicated his blue uniform. "The name is Bassett. Lieutenant Bassett. How are you, Eddie?"

Carnovan lay there, breathing heavily, the old hate starting to burn in the back of his mind. This was the man who had framed a murder on him. This was the man who had had him sent to the living hell of Yuma.

"So you hid in the army," said Carnovan.

"Not exactly. This is just a temporary disguise. It makes it that much easier to get my hands on some guns. It's too long and complicated to explain right now, Eddie. I don't have much time to visit with you."

"So that's why Eaker waited," Car-

novan said slowly. "He was going to let Nelson put a slug into me earlier this night but he wanted you to do it."

"Wasn't that nice of him?" asked Sholts. "He told me there was something for me here in the barn. Imagine my surprise when I found you. This isn't quite the way you'd planned it, is it, Eddie?"

Carnovan said nothing. He lay flat on his back on the straw, staring up at the guttering light of the lantern, watching the evil play of emotions across Sholts' dark features.

"No, I don't think it is, Eddie," said Sholts when Carnovan made no reply. "You made a mistake when you broke out of Yuma. You wouldn't be getting a hot slug in your belly if you hadn't, would you?"

THE INTENT flared in Sholts' face, in the narrowing of his blazing eyes, in the crooked tightening of his mouth, in the tense curling of his finger about the trigger. A dryness filled Carnovan's mouth and rasped in his throat. An instant of panic hit him and then a cold awareness and he did the one last desperate thing he could think of.

He kicked up with his boots, hoping to distract Sholts, and the sudden, abrupt movement did, wavering Sholts' glance. Carnovan did not draw his .44. Lying on his back, he tipped the holster up, fired through the leather.

Sholts gave a hoarse, startled shout, jumping back as the chimney of the lantern shattered to shards from the Remington's slug. Sholts' gun roared but it was a hurried, wild shot.

Carnovan rolled across the floor. In the darkness he could hear Sholts' heavy, frightened breathing. Suddenly the man began to shout.

"Eaker! Nelson! Amador!"

Carnovan threw two quick shots at the sound of the voice, getting a shrill, panicked scream out of Sholts. Then the man bolted. Carnovan could hear the terrified hurry of his flight. He threw another shot, drawing a horse squall out of Sholts, and then the man's body was a momentary, fleeting blot as he dashed out the door.

Carnovan ejected the spent shells, inserted fresh cartridges, cursing all the while. He'd had Sholts. After five long, hungry, hate-filled years, he'd had the man only to let him get away.

Carnovan rushed to the door of the barn, glanced out. He threw a look up at the house in time to see the dim, running figure of Sholts bolt inside. Someone opened up with a Winchester from a window of the house, driving Carnovan hastily back inside the barn.

He could hear the squealing and snorting of the horses in the corral and after a while, above the sound of the shooting from the house, came the thunder of hoofs. Carnovan risked a look outside.

The man was fighting his rearing, plunging, panicked animal and he had another mount with him, a horse with an empty saddle. Carnovan caught a glimpse of white, flashing teeth in the darkness and the shadow of a tall, peaked sombrero.

"Come, Carnovan," cried Amador. "Hurry."

A moment of doubt, of suspicion assailed Carnovan. He had a swift recollection of a razor-edged knife and a cruel, ugly face. Then came another hail of bullets.

"Hurry, Carnovan," shouted Amador.

Carnovan could give it no more consideration than that. He bolted from the door, running swiftly, his spurs jingling shrilly. He leaped into the saddle of the skittery horse. A shrill shout broke from Amador's throat and he spurred his horse around the barn, putting it between himself and the house.

As he rode along, Carnovan marveled that it was his own bay he was riding. Out of range of the bullets, Amador reined in his horse at the edge of a wash. He was chuckling harshly.

"They'll do no riding for a while. With my cuchillo, I slashed their

cinch straps. Until they sew them, they'll do no riding."

Carnovan sat his saddle, keeping a tight rein on his jittery bay, unable to shake that faint doubt from his mind. Amador must have sensed it for his teeth flashed again.

"You are wondering about me, are you not, Carnovan? I am on your side. Believe me. I am not one of them even though I have ridden with them a year, lived with them through twelve foul months."

Carnovan had hipped around in his kak, staring back in the direction of the buildings, his hand on his Remington. The urge raged inside him to go back. Sholts was there. Everything in Carnovan pulled at him to go back. Go back before Sholts fled again. *This might be your only chance, Carnovan....*

Amador moved his horse in close to Carnovan. The Mexican touched Carnovan's arm and there was a sympathetic understanding in Amador's voice.

"You would like to go back, wouldn't you, Carnovan? I, too, have a score to settle with one of them. I didn't know which one until tonight and then things happened so fast I had no time. We wouldn't have a chance back there, Carnovan. Instead of going to them, why not make them come to us?"

Carnovan looked at Amador. The man sounded sincere enough. "How would you do that?" Carnovan asked.

Amador gave a cold, cruel chuckle. He pointed down into the wash. "Look up the arroyo a little, Carnovan. In the moonlight. Do you see the mules? Worthington had been sent to guard them but the shooting seems to have lured him back to the house. Those mules carry guns for de la Luz. Why not take the mules with us? Eaker would be sure to follow. His cupidity would not allow him to lose those guns."

"Where would you go with the mules?"

"Into the Baranquillas. I know them very well. Here in the open desert we would not have much of a chance. In the Baranquillas, who knows? They will have to come to us. They will have to do the leading. You may have your reckoning with Sholts and I with my man. What do you say, Carnovan?..."

THEY TOOK their stand where an unscalable rampart reared its high, jagged height toward the sky. This they could put at their backs. The shelf on which they were was littered with large, volcanic rocks.

Below them, the land fell away in a rather sharp slope for about a hundred yards where it leveled off again briefly. There was little cover on the slope. Some sage grew here and a few twisted, stubby jackpine.

They removed the boxed guns and ammunition from the mules' backs and then turned the animals loose. There was room for their two mounts in a sharp recess down against the base of the rampart, a primeval hollow that would shelter the horses from gunfire.

All they could do was wait. They had left a plain trail and now, during the day, it could hardly be missed. Carnovan lay flat on a rock, staring down the mountainside. The land lay empty in his gaze and, as the waiting began to irk him, the doubts, the uncertainties, the distrust brought an irascible anger to him.

He turned his head to look at Amador. The man was seated cross-legged on the ground, whetting the blade of his knife against his thigh, a cold, expectant light in his dark eyes.

The impatience, the fear of ultimate loss put an edge in Carnovan's voice. "I don't see anything yet," he said.

"Patience, Carnovan," murmured Amador. "Patience."

The anger flared out in Carnovan's tone. "Patience be hanged. I had a chance to square accounts with Sholts last night. Instead I listened to you and what's that got me? Were you

paid to lead me up here, Amador? Did Sholts pay you to trick me into coming up here while he skipped the country?"

The blade kept flashing as Amador manipulated it. His eyes became ugly as he stared up at Carnovan. "Perhaps because I know how you feel, I will pretend I do not hear your insinuations, Carnovan. There is nothing to do but wait. We have left a plain trail. They will follow. Remember that I have been with them a year. I know them. They will come."

"Patience," snorted Carnovan. "You didn't spend five years in Yuma. You didn't spend five years of hell. Sure, *you* can have patience, Amador."

"No," said Amador slowly, "I did not spend five years in Yuma. With me, it has been little more than two years and as you infer, Carnovan, I wouldn't know what hell is. I lived for twelve foul months with my man. I rode with him. I fought beside him. The man I was after but I didn't know it was him. I had to be sure first. It took me twelve foul months to find out. No, Carnovan, as you say I didn't spend five years of hell."

With his left hand Amador indicated his face. With his right, he kept on whetting the knife against his thigh.

"Look at me, Carnovan," he said. "Do you believe any one could love a man as ugly as I? Do you believe a woman could look at me without revulsion, look at me and learn to love me despite this face of mine?" He paused.

"And would you believe it that she was beautiful, Carnovan?" Amador went on after a while. "As fair a woman as ever was fashioned by the Creator. That was my Doloritas. Have you seen the ocotillo in bloom, Carnovan? That was the color of her lips. Her eyes—"

He broke off abruptly. His voice, when he spoke again was bitterly cold.

"I did not know which one it was. Eaker. Nelson. Sholts. All I knew was that it was one of them. They were drunk, all three of them. You've seen how cruel and heartless they can be when they're sober. You have yet to see them drunk. They were drunk that night. One of them destroyed my Doloritas. She could not endure the shame. With this cuchillo she ended her life."

THE DARK eyes blazed, the muscles bulged beneath the whiskers along Amador's jaw. "They did not know me. I became one of them. I had to be careful. I had to be patient. I could not let them know what I was after or they would have killed me instantly. I am not afraid to die but my Doloritas must be avenged. Last night I finally found out for sure. He's always bragging about his women. Last night he mentioned her. I could have killed him then but it would have had to be quick. I want him alone. I want my time with him. Only then will I avenge *mi pobrecita*."

A hoarseness thickened Carnovan's tone. One of three, Amador had said. "Who is it?" asked Carnovan.

"Pronto Nelson..."

The shot made a wicked whine past Carnovan's head. He cried out in surprise and came tumbling off the rock. Amador had risen to his knees.

"Didn't I tell you, Carnovan?" he asked. "Didn't I tell you they would come?"

They crawled forward on their stomachs until they could peer down the slope. Five horses with empty saddles showed far down the mountainside. Studying them intently, Carnovan saw that one of them was Natalie's pinto.

A fusillade hammered against the rocks sheltering Carnovan and Amador. Then the shooting stilled and Eaker's cold, insolent voice called up to them.

"You'll never get away with it, Carnovan. We've got you trapped. Now how about you and Amador being sensible? All we want is those guns. We're swapping you your lives

for the guns. Be prudent and accept our offer."

"Would you really keep your word, Eaker?" Carnovan shouted back. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

"We'll get you anyhow. We're offering you your one chance to get out of this alive. Don't be a fool, Carnovan. We want those guns and we intend to get them."

"Well, come and get them. They're here for the taking."

Another fusillade answered him. When he looked again, he saw them fanning out below. They all had Winchesters while he and Amador had only their pistols.

Amador was watching Nelson. The man had swung out far to the left, working up the slope where it butted against the sheer rampart. There was a smattering of stones and boulders and thick mesquite that gave him a good measure of cover.

SUDDENLY, Amador unbuckled his shell belt, dropping it at Carnovan's feet. "I will not need this," said Amador. "I do not want it with me to tempt me. The cuchillo will have to suffice."

Then he was moving out among the rocks, hugging the rampart.

One of them below spotted Amador and opened up with a Winchester. Carnovan saw the peaked sombrero whipped from the Mexican's head and then Amador had dropped to the ground, working ahead on all fours.

Someone below began shouting. It sounded like Ben Sholts. "Watch it, Pronto! Watch it! Watch Amador!"

The Winchester began again. Carnovan knew his Remington would never carry that far but he thrust it around a boulder and thumbed off three spaced shots. That diverted the Winchester. A slug ricocheted off the boulder, spattering bits of grit against Carnovan's face.

"Watch him, Pronto!" Sholts yelled again. "Watch Amador!"

Carnovan caught another brief flash of the black top of Amador's head and then a thick, close-knit patch of mesquite cut him from view. There was a moment of prescient silence and then a Winchester blared but the gunshot did not come from Sholts. It had sounded from down in the mesquite where Amador had disappeared.

The Winchester roared again and fast upon the noise there came a shrill, agonized scream.

Then the shrieks stilled. Suddenly a vast, ugly silence enveloped the Baranquillas. Carnovan took his face away from the rock and opened wet, stinging eyes. There was no sound to be heard anywhere.

At great length he heard the labored, pained breathing. The Remington clutched tightly in his fist, Carnovan edged along the boulder. The gasps were louder now, anguishedly sibilant. Carnovan peered around the boulder and the cry burst out of him.

"Amador!"

The Mexican was dragging himself along on his stomach. A bloody froth rimmed his mouth.

"Amador!" Carnovan cried again, reaching down a hand to pull him up on the shelf.

Amador flopped over on his back. His whole shirt was covered with blood from the two bullet holes in his chest. He fixed his glazing eyes on Carnovan and with his very last out.

"*Mi pobrecita* is avenged..."

CARNOVAN lay flat on the ground. In his mind, Nelson's agonized screams still pounded.

The call came from down the slope. "Carnovan! Can you hear me, Carnovan?"

He did not answer.

"Carnovan!" the call came again. "Carnovan!" It was Eaker's voice.

Carnovan rolled over and sat up with his back to the boulder.

"Carnovan!" The voice was angrily insistent now. "Answer me, Carnovan!"

He turned his face that way and

shouted, "What do you want now?"

"I want to deal with you, Carnovan."

"Go to hell, Eaker."

"Carnovan!" the voice was thoroughly angry now. "Listen to me."

"If you want the guns, send Sholts up here for them."

"Damn you, Carnovan!" Eaker screamed.

Carnovan checked the loads in his .44. He spun the cylinder and worked the hammer back and forth several times and studied the long seven and a half inch barrel.

"Carnovan!" Eaker was trying again. "I'm sending Natalie up to talk to you. Do you hear, Carnovan?"

That brought Carnovan around and up on his knees. He threw a look down the slope and there she was, making her way up the hill.

Carnovan stared and for a moment the old hate, the acrid memories faded, and he knew only this strange, alien feeling. She came up on the shelf, walked along the parapet of boulders and stepped between two of them and there she was, standing in front of Carnovan.

She was breathing perceptibly from her climb, her breasts rising and falling beneath her shirt. She smiled at him and beckoned with her head.

"You can stand up now. They won't shoot."

Her eyes went past him to Amador and her face turned suddenly sick and a strangled gasp tore out of her. She turned swiftly, putting her back to the dead man.

CARNOVAN rose slowly to his feet and he moved over behind her so that she was between him and the slope. She faced around slowly, keeping her eyes rigidly on him.

"Did you come to make sure I've got the guns?" asked Carnovan acidly. "You can see them there up against the cliff."

"Will you let me explain?" she asked, touching his sleeve with her hand. "Eaker must have those guns. De la Luz will be furious at any delay.

"You know you haven't a chance, Carnovan," she went on when he did not speak. "They can always starve you out. They'll eventually get the guns no matter what you do but Eaker needs them right away. He's willing to forget everything if you'll just get up and ride away without giving him any more trouble."

"Can I trust him to keep his word?" Carnovan asked suspiciously. "How can I be sure he won't cut me down when he gets me out in the open?"

"You can use me as a shield."

He stared at her closely. The old hate seemed to ebb a little, hanging in the back of his mind in a faint, irascible way, seeming not to matter so much any more.

"Don't you trust me, Carnovan?" she asked softly. "They won't shoot if I'm in front of you. If you're so distrustful, you can hold me against you. What do you say, Carnovan?"

His voice was slightly thick. "Will you go away with me?" he asked suddenly, full of a quick hunger.

She considered that a while. Her eyes studied his face and her lips pursed thoughtfully. He had just begun to lose hope when she spoke.

"Do I mean that much to you, Carnovan?"

"You do."

"Will you leave instantly if I go with you?"

He turned his head, staring bleakly down the slope. "I've got to take Sholts with me. I need him to clear my name. Otherwise, I'm a hunted man. It'll be back to Yuma if they catch me. I've got to have Sholts."

She put a hand on his arm. "Can't you forget him, Carnovan? You can go north where you're not known and start all over again. Wouldn't I be enough for you, Carnovan? Couldn't you forget the past and Ben Sholts?"

"Why do you stick up for him?" asked Carnovan. "Eaker said you didn't know him. He's a treacherous, lying, bushwhacking, sneaking son, Natalie. What he needs is some of

the stuff that Pronto Nelson got."

"Then you won't change your mind about Sholts?"

He shook his head. She walked several steps away from him.

"You never asked me my last name, did you, Carnovan?" she asked quietly. "It's Sholts. Mrs. Natalie Sholts!"

THE SURPRISE and unexpectedness of it jarred Carnovan. For a moment he knew only the incredulous shock of it. His mind refused to believe it but he looked again at the girl and what he saw on her face reiterated the truth.

"I love him very much, Carnovan," she was saying softly. "Despite his failings, I love him. I'll do anything for him. I'd have gone away with you to save him, Carnovan. I rather like you but I know you'll never rest until you get Ben and I know you're the kind that will get him. That is why I must kill you, Carnovan!"

Her hand reached for the .38 at her side and Carnovan reacted instinctively. His fingers flashed, the Remington lifted, and then the realization hit him like a blow. His every fibre rebelled against it.

"No, Natalie, no!" he cried, watching with widening eyes the leveling of her .38.

Carnovan cried out again, a harsh, wordless shout, and as Natalie's finger curled about the trigger, he was diving.

He landed on his shoulder behind a rock, hearing the whine of the .38 slug past his ear, and pulled himself up into a crouch, the Remington held out before him.

She was moving toward him, angling out to the side to get a shot at him from a flank. The wind stirred her hair and the sunlight found the gold in it. The .38 came up again.

"Please, Natalie," Carnovan begged. "Not you. Stay out of it. This is between me and Ben."

She fired, chipping bits of stone off the rock by Carnovan's head. His Remington tipped up. He had the hammer eared back.

She moved over two more steps. She rested the barrel of the .38 across her uplifted left arm. This time she would not miss.

"Natalie!" screamed Carnovan.

He could not remember willing it. He knew only the recoil of the butt against his palm, the savage, blaring roar of the Remington, the sudden stab of remorse blinding him. She gave a little cry and her .38 went off in a wild, screaming shot.

She put her left arm up over her eyes as if shielding them, her mouth contorted in great pain. She started forward with sagging, erratic steps, moving across the shelf, and just as she reached the edge of the slope beyond the rocks, she collapsed.

Carnovan had risen dazedly to his feet, his eyes wet with tears, a repentant, futile anger filling him. He caught a glimpse of shadowy movement down by the rampart. A sudden, malignant virulence gripped him.

He waited, the .44 ready, watching the movement working up through the boulders and mesquite where Amador had gone to meet Nelson. This, then, had been their plan. They had sent her to engage him in talk while they sneaked up. But they mustn't have told her or she wouldn't have tried co hard to kill him.

Eaker was the first to show. There was a hard, feral look on his face and he held a spur-triggered .45 in his hand.

"Eaker," Carnovan called softly.

He waited just long enough for the first startled flash of surprise to touch Eaker's face and then Carnovan fired twice, rapidly. Eaker emitted a shrill, shattering screech.

He lifted a shaking hand to his chest, touching the wounds that had not yet begun to bleed.

"So, Carnovan, so?" he whispered harshly.

SUDDENLY, he turned his back on Carnovan and went lurching back

down the slope.

"Eaker!" Carnovan shouted. "Stop, Eaker, or I'll let you have it in the back anyhow!"

A harsh, grating laugh answered. "Eaker!" Carnovan cried again, moving cautiously forward.

Only the echoes answered him this time. There was a moment of aching, pregnant silence and then Ben Sholts began to scream in a shrill, terrified way.

"No, Ward, no, no, no!"

Carnovan counted them. There were six shots, all of them spaced, deliberate. Sholts stopped screaming after the second.

Carnovan went down the slope, moving from boulder to boulder in a dulled, stumbling walk. He found Eaker seated with his back resting against a rock. Blood had started to discolor his shirt.

He gave a weak, gloating laugh when he spied Carnovan. With a limp, wavering gesture, Eaker indicated where Ben Sholts lay sprawled dead on the ground.

"There he is, Carnovan," said Eaker. "Take him back to Yuma with you. Keep him in your cell to remind you of Ward Eaker. Who'll clear your name now, Carnovan? Who'll save you from going back to Yuma now? Who will there be to testify that Sholts killed Bud Yates in Valentine and not you? You've killed me, Carnovan, but it looks like I take the last pot anyhow..."

The first comprehension he had of anything else was the sharp click of a cocking gun hammer behind him. *Worthington,* the thought flashed groaningly across Carnovan's mind. He started to whirl, lifting his .44, but Worthington's voice came cold and deterring.

"I wouldn't, Carnovan," said Worthington. "I wouldn't do anything rash. Just drop your gun, Carnovan. Then turn around if you wish."

Reluctantly, Carnovan dropped the Remington to the ground. He turned slowly, facing Worthington. The man stood there on his huge, bowed legs and strangely enough, there seemed to be the hint of a smile beneath the long, brown mustache bisecting his face.

"Perhaps I should introduce myself. I am Marshal Frederick Worthington, United States Government. My badge and commission are in the territorial governor's office. The job was too perilous to have them on my person."

He put away his gun and his smile broadened. He nodded at the dead men on the ground. "I heard Eaker. I think I heard enough so that you won't have to go back to Yuma, Carnovan."

Reaction was setting in Carnovan. Anger flared to his brain. "Where were you while I was shooting it out with them? Why didn't you lend a hand? Why did you have to egg on Eaker when he was working me over the other night? What were you doing all that time? I ought to slug you, Worthington."

Worthington's face darkened. His voice was brittle. "Don't forget you were an escaped convict, Carnovan. Why should I have wasted sympathy on you? I've been working for six months, getting Eaker's confidence, finding enough proof of his dealings and his connections. I worked too hard and too long to jeopardize myself and my findings to help a convict just broken out of Yuma."

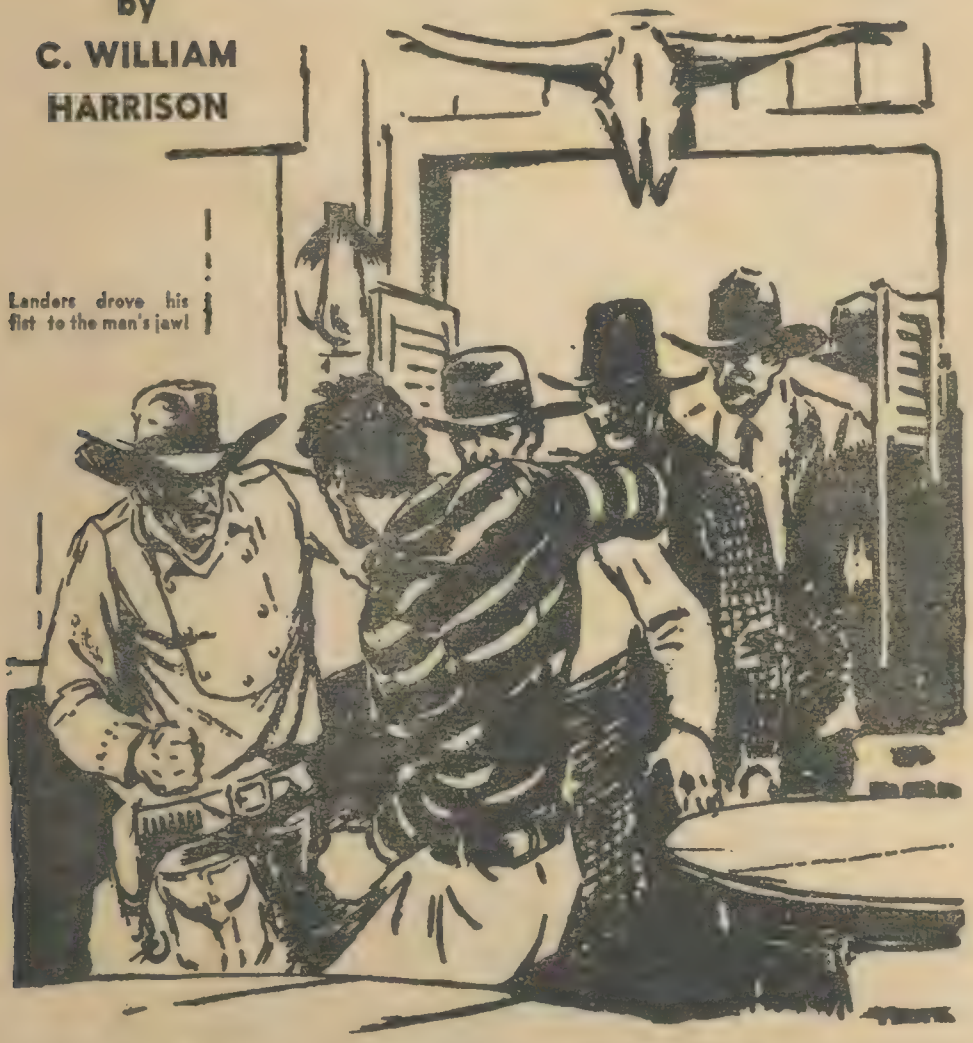
A grim smile touched his lips. "Besides, they were doing too good of a job of exterminating themselves. This is going to save the government quite a bit of expense for trials and prison sentences and possible executions. Cheer up, Carnovan. You're clear now. You can go back home. You're a free man!"

Carnovan turned and looked up the slope to where a bit of black and red checkered shirt showed. A lonely, mourning regret filled his throat with a cloying ache.

"Sure," he said heavily. "Why shouldn't I cheer up, Worthington. Like you say, I'm free..."

WHIPSAWED

by
C. WILLIAM
HARRISON



Maybe the three gunmen were right. Maybe Coe Landers had been on their backtrail the past two years. Maybe that's what his tied-down hard holster meant.....

THE STAGE traveled west out of Lordsburg, rolling through its own dust with a hot wind relentlessly nagging the driver and his string of Morgans. By late morning, Coe Landers had the desert behind him, and by mid-afternoon he had seen the last of the high brown hard-rock country. The road tipped down out of the Pass toward the copper town that lay pinched and twisted between the bare flanks of the canyon, and when he jolted around the last of the switchback turns, Landers released the brake

handle and whooped his team into a run.

He wanted to draw the town's attention to him, and he did. The stage thumped across the plank bridge, and the wheel tires squawled as he made the sharp swing into Main street. He hauled back on the reins, kicked the brake lever down, and the stage rattled to a halt in front of the company office. Sam Dohenny was waiting there, red-faced with resentment, a crowd of curious on-lookers gathering behind him.

"A regular hell-for-leather entrance, Landers," Sam Dohenny said. "All you needed to complete the touch was to let out a few rodeo yells."

Coe grinned at the crowd. "I'll remember next time, Sam," he said, and tossed the mail sack down to the company man. He saw Maxon there in the crowd, and Dee Romaine, and Grebber, but he gave them no more than a single searching glance. He wasn't ready yet to put the final pressure against them.

Sam Dohenny was a small self-important man who couldn't let well enough alone. "They wired me that Pete Frazee got drunk and you'd been hired to bring the mail through. It's not the first time you've worked for this company, Landers. You know our rules. We never run our teams at the end of a day's pull."

"For a fact?" Landers said drily. He hadn't hurt the horses. He had held them in all day, and they had needed a good run to uncock them. "That case, Sam, you'd better do your duty and fire me."

Dohenny reared his head back, staring angrily at the tall man. "Now you look here, Landers—"

Coe had another look at Maxon, Romaine, and Grebber. He swung the sacked saddle across his shoulder, and climbed down from the stage. "I'll save you the trouble, Sam. I've just quit."

HE DREW laughter from the crowd, and he paused in turning away as if to appreciate it. His glance traveled almost indifferently toward the three men watching him from the corner of the stage office, and he saw no amusement in any of them.

They've been wondering a long while, he thought; *now they're beginning to get sure about me.*

Lew Grebber, the short thick one, held a frown between his tawny eyes, as if he was digging into his memory for the key to an important puzzle. Burke Maxon was making a studied effort to remain impassive, with something tight, indrawn and angry shifting through his narrow stare.

The slim one with the high lean shoulders—Dee Romaine—met Coe Landers' glance and shuttled his eyes away. *He's the one who'll crack first,* Landers thought bleakly, for there was a fine sheen of perspiration on Romaine's forehead and above his thin upper lip.

Grebber turned abruptly, said something to Burke Maxon. Maxon shook his head jerkily. The three wheeled sharply, tramped along the plank walk, and shouldered through the winged doors of the Empire saloon.

Coe Landers worked his way through the crowd, still lugging his sacked saddle. He knew now that he was getting close to trouble, and he wasn't sure how he was going to handle it. He came to the Empire and hesitated, then a streak of recklessness reared up through him, and he turned through the saloon doors.

Dee Romaine, he saw with his first sliding glance, had taken a corner table for himself and was laying out a game of solitaire. Romaine was clumsy with the cards, and he was a better gambler than that. Something was nagging the slim man's thoughts; he was on edge and nervous.

Landers dropped his saddle to the floor just inside the door. He crossed the room, wondering narrowly if he wasn't being foolish to give Romaine a place behind his back.

Burke Maxon and Grebber were at the bar, with untouched drinks before them. Maxon watched Landers steadily with his low-lidded eyes, through the backbar mirror. Lew Grebber turned sidewise against the bar as the tall man lifted a boot to the brass rail, and something brash stirred hotly in the quick scrutiny of Grebber's stare. The man raised a short, irritable voice through the sounds of the room.

"How come you keep following us around, fellow?"

Landers looked around. "Didn't know that I was." His smile was slow and indifferent. "Are you the only ones the Empire will sell a drink to?" He nodded to the barkeep. "Rye, Charley."

Lew Grebber shoved angrily away from the bar. Then caution caught him, and he stood there scowling darkly at the tall man.

"It strikes me you're acting a little proud, bucko. Maybe I don't like it."

Landers lifted his drink, sipped it. Through the mirror he saw Dee Romaine lay down the cards and rest his hands lightly on the edge of the table. Landers put down his drink and smiled across at Grebber.

"All right. So you don't like it."

Charley Hendershott spoke nervously from behind the bar. "Take it easy, boys. I don't want any trouble in my place."

"No trouble here, Charley," Landers said.

But Lew Grebber was the kind of man whose temper, once started, snowballed through all sense of caution. He said harshly, "You've been dogging us for the last three months. You followed us from this town to Tyree Wells. Then Paxton's Corners, Lordsburg, and now back here again. I want to know why."

Landers shrugged. "Just drifting."

"Like hell you are!"

Coe Landers said softly, "Your dog is barking too loud, friend. You'd better call him in."

The thick man's face darkened, and the flare of his temper shoved him a long stride toward Landers. "I want to know why you keep following us around," he said harshly. "I aim to have your answer."

HE WAS A short fellow, but he was massive in weight and power, with the strength of a rock crusher in his deep shoulders and thick arms. He rocked to a halt in front of Landers. He cursed the tall man in a low, bitter monotone.

Landers said nothing. His thoughts were busy with the scales, balancing this scene for what it held for him. Burke Maxon was still leaning across the bar, nursing his drink, and it was that man's pretended unconcern that gave all this away. Maxon was the whip that would slash out from a second angle when this trouble broke, and Dee Romaine, at the card table, had been staked out to make this whipsaw even more ruthlessly efficient.

Grebber said roughly, "Are you going to start talking?"

Landers turned slowly to face the man full on. "You're getting to be a bother, friend."

Grebber shoved the heel of his hand against Landers' chest, pinning the tall man against the bar with the weight of his thick body.

Landers sighed. "You're crowding too close."

He accepted the thick man's pinning weight another second. Then he moved. He skidded his back around from the bar, freeing himself. Suddenly off balance, Lew Grebber swayed forward. Landers drove his fist to the shelf of the man's jaw. He stepped back, came in again. He slammed his left to the man's middle, and as Grebber kinked forward, he drilled his right to the base of the ear. Grebber blacked out.

Landers wheeled sharply, his gaze riding between Burke Maxon and Dee Romaine. "Either of you feel like carrying this on?"

Maxon was keyed up for violence, but this hadn't gone as he had expected. He shrugged.

"Grebber has his days like this. He asked for it."

Dee Romaine was almost crouching at the table, a bright gloss of sweat on his forehead. His slim right hand was poised for the mad slash down to his gun. His voice was high and thin, with a singing wildness to it.

"Damn it, Maxon, if we keep going on like this—"

"Take it easy, kid."

"Now's the time, damn it!" Romaine flared. "Why not now? If we keep jumping around the circle from town to town—"

Maxon yelled at him. "I said shut up, kid!"

Romaine silenced.

Maxon is the brains, Landers thought; *He's the sharp one of the three.*

Burke Maxon's heavy eyelids blinked the hot violence out of his stare, and he grinned to Landers. "The way you seem to be tailing us from town to town has got Grebber and the kid jumpy, I guess—for some reason."

"For some reason," Landers echoed. He watched Maxon closely. "No questions, then?"

"If I have," the man said slowly, "I'll ask them at my own time."

Landers nodded. "Suit yourself."

"That's one thing you can count on," Maxon said, and turned away.

Landers finished his drink, and looked down at Lew Grebber. The man was still unconscious.

HE CROSSED the saloon and picked up his saddle sack. Burke Maxon's dead black eyes continued to watch him unswervingly from the bar. Landers looked at him a minute, letting the silence build up another pressure in the saloon. Then he turned and looked across at Dee Romaine.

"Red trey on the black deuce," Landers said softly. "You're forgetting your game, Romaine."

Outside, Landers angled across the street and into the Copper Queen hotel. The desk clerk watched him as he crossed the lobby, a thin gaunt old man too wise in the ways of a tough town to betray his curiosity.

"Same room, Coe?"

"Same one, Eph."

The hotel man chewed the corner from a plug of tobacco. "Madge Dickson stopped in yesterday. She asked about you."

"Thanks, Eph."

"You hear this, and you hear that, and maybe none of it is a fact. I told her I reckoned you'd be out to visit her when you got back to town."

Landers smiled. "A little chore to finish first," he said. He took the key, and went to the stairway. He turned on a thought, glanced back to the hotel man.

"I'll need a horse, Eph. Tell Abe to saddle up for me, and leave it out front at the rail."

His room was in the front corner of the hotel, and from his window he could look across town to the latticed gallows frames that were upthrust like skeletal fingers above the mines at this darkening hour.

From his room he could see all these things; and could see the saloon, the livery stable, and the crooked length of the street which Burke Maxon and his followers would have to travel.

He thought about these men. He hadn't been certain about them before, but now he was. These were the three he had waited for two years to find. He had played a grim game with them, keeping a steady pressure against them.

He knew he wouldn't have to wait much longer. Lew Grebber had made the first abortive move, and he knew that mistake would not be made a second time. He had learned about them, but in doing that he had narrowed their certainty about him.

He stood there at the window, watching the street below, remembering a boy who had tried to square a debt and had died with a bullet in his back. Someone knocked on the door. Landers turned quickly, dropping his

hand to his gun.

"It's unlocked. Come on in."

THE DOOR opened, and it was Madge Dickson standing there, tall and slim and with a questioning half smile on her lips. She closed the door quietly behind her.

"I was afraid you might leave town again without seeing me, Coe."

"I wanted to come," Landers said. "I've been busy, Madge. Maybe later..."

His tone was edged with impatience, and he wanted her to leave. But she didn't. She leaned back against the door, watching him steadily.

"How much later, Coe? Like it was last time you were in town?"

He didn't answer.

She smiled slowly. "You don't add up, Coe. You haven't lasted more than three weeks on any job you've had for the last two years. So it's a little difficult for me to understand how you could ever be too busy to visit a friend."

Landers glanced over his shoulder, through the window toward the saloon. The street was still empty. He wondered if Maxon and the others could have left through the saloon's rear door, without him seeing them. He doubted that. This was the tag-end of a tough and brutal game, and they would have to settle with him before they could leave town. They would need a wagon to freight the buried gold, and wagon tracks were hard to hide—and they would need more time than he had ever allowed them to have.

They can't move now, he thought, *until I'm out of their way.*

He brought his eyes back to the girl. "My job isn't what you think."

"Not driving stage or being payroll guard for the mines?" Her voice was quiet, insistent. "Not staying on as foreman of the Roman Four ranch? Not any of those things, Coe?"

"No."

It was a poor answer to give her. He knew he owed her an explanation.

He said, "I had a half brother once. Ben had a wild streak in him, and got mixed up with the wrong crowd. They raided a town down in Mexico, and the gold they got away with is still buried in some canyon near here."

"You're trying to recover that gold?"

"Yes," he answered. "Not only the gold, though. It was the way Ben was the day I talked to him two years ago. He was remembering the shooting and killing when the gang raided that town. He was remembering a woman who got in the way, and a Padre watching his church being gutted by flames. It was what Ben remembered and couldn't forget that was working on him."

Landers looked across his shoulder, through the window. He brought his eyes back to Madge.

"They looted the town and hauled the stuff away in a wagon. It was slow going, and the Rurales caught up with them. There was a fight, and most of the gang were killed. Only four of them got away. They buried the gold, and split up until things quieted down. That was when Ben wrote me for help. He wanted to square his debt. He told me about the raid, but he didn't get a chance to tell me where the gold was buried. Or the names of the other three outlaws. Someone up on the ridge put a bullet through him while we were talking."

HE COULD still remember the harsh slam of the shot from the ridge rocks above, that had ripped the life out of Ben's body.

"Stay around and watch for them, Coe." It was a whisper, words that traveled on the last sliding breath of the boy. "They'll need a wagon to move the gold. Sooner or later, they'll show their hand. Coe...Coe, take off my boots..."

Madge said, "You can't do it alone. If you know who those men are—"

The door behind her suddenly kicked open, the impact of it throwing her out into the room. She tripped and fell with a sharp cry of alarm.

Burke Maxon said bleakly, "Stay

where you are, girlie. You're cute like that, and you're safer there. Landers—don't move!"

Landers stood rigid, with the window at his back as Burke Maxon and Lew Grebber came into the room. They kicked the door shut behind them, stepped wide of each other. They had guns in their hands, and danger was in their eyes—and the bright gloss of kill lust.

"Something you ought to know," Maxon said thinly. "Dee Romaine is staked out behind that water barrel at the side of the saloon. With a rifle, Landers, and Romaine is good with a long gun. Make one wrong move, and he'll put a slug in your back like he did your brother."

Madge got up from the floor. Her face was white.

He said, "Don't blame yourself, Madge. If I hadn't been off-guard talking to you, they'd have found another way to get to me."

Maxon's grin was thin and tight. "We wondered why you kept doggin' us from town to town, and now we know the answer."

Landers measured the two men, balancing his chances. They had planned well, this time. Dee Romaine, staked out with a rifle on his back, was their insurance. But it was Lew Grebber who would kill. He watched the thick man start across the room, rocking the hammer of his gun, laughing in a soft mocking way.

"A belly shot will do it, tough man. It'll give you time to remember what you did in the saloon. A belly shot makes it slow and gives a man time to think."

GREBBER halted close in front of Landers dragging out this moment before his kill for all the dark satisfaction he could drain from it. Madge made a small appealing sound that no man in the room ever heard.

Landers moved. He twisted desperately to one side, spinning away from the window. He heard the blast of the heavy bore rifle. He felt the slug jerk the loose fold of his coat, and heard the meaty impact of the bullet striking Lew Grebber's chest.

Burke Maxon fired, throwing his shot wild. He swiveled his gun desperately as Landers' up-slashing weapon flared and roared. Maxon stepped backward, tripped, and jarred against the wall, coughing as he fell.

Landers whirled, and through the shattered window saw Dee Romaine's thin shape jumping back from the barrel, trying for another shot. Landers fired, and knew instantly he, had missed. He saw the muzzle blast of Romaine's rifle, and splinters exploded from the window frame beside his head.

He lined his sights carefully, and fired a second time at the man in the alley. Romaine dropped the rifle as if it had gone white-hot in his hands. He turned away, his thin fragment of a cry lost in the excited shouting of the men along the street. Romaine started running, but his legs had lost the strength to hold him up. He fell, sliding face down through the dust; his arm moved once, and then was still.

Landers turned slowly, the gun sagging at his side. He looked at Madge, and saw the fear for him in the pale edges of her smile.

"It's all right now, Madge."

Relief and a gladness suddenly melted in her eyes, but she did not altogether cry. She struggled to keep calmness in her voice as she spoke.

"Enough, Coe? Is this all?"

"Finished," he said.

He dropped the gun and went to her and he saw the bright gloss of panic still in her eyes. Crying would help, he thought.

"I wonder," he said, "if I can get my job back at the Roman Four?"

She began crying then, with her face against his chest and the softness of her body close against him. After a while, after it was all over, she looked up at him, again smiling.

"I'm quite sure you can have your job back, Coe. You see," she said, and laughed softly, "I have never hired another man to take your place."

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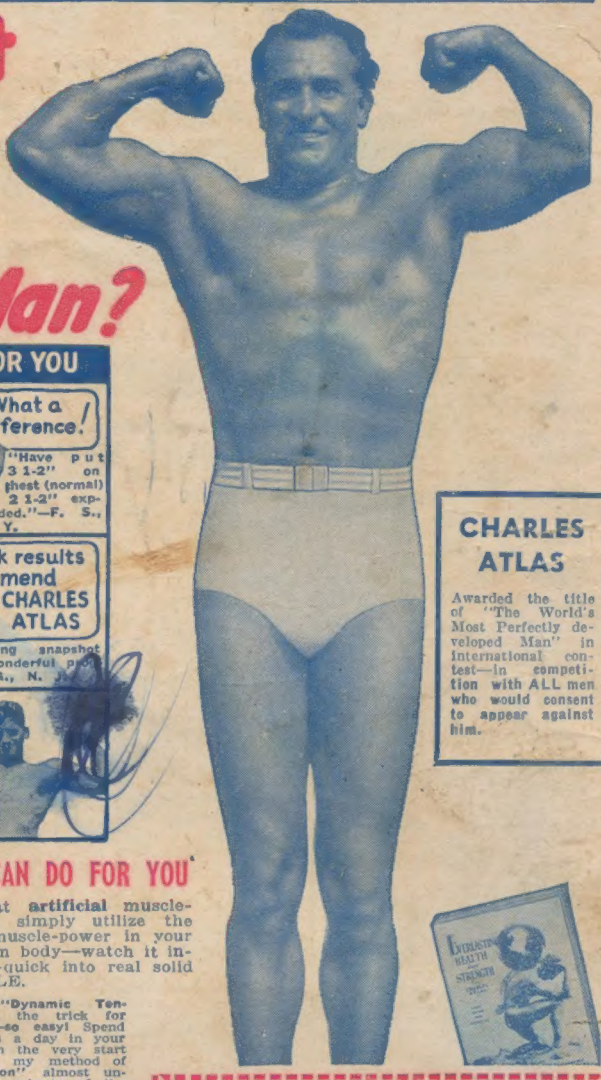

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